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Table of Contents

5 **Artist's Project**
Jeanne Dunning
Tom Thumb, the New Oedipus

Forum
Sexing Sculpture: New Approaches to Theorizing the Object

27 Jillian Hernandez and Susan Richmond
Introduction

30 Rachel Lachowicz
Portfolio: Material Specificity and the Index of the Feminine

34 Rachel Middleman
Rethinking Vaginal Iconology with Hannah Wilke's Sculpture

46 Gordon Hall
Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture

58 Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy
Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation

72 Lily Cox-Richard
Portfolio: *The Stand (Possessing Powers)*

78 Nicholas Hartigan and Joan Kee
Lily Cox-Richard: On the Powers of Taking a Stand

Reviews

84 Joanne Heath on Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein, eds., *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*, and Rachel Epp Buller, ed., *Reconciling Art and Mothering*; Tina Rivers on Ken Johnson, *Are You Experienced: How Psychedelic Consciousness Transformed Modern Art*, and David S. Rubin, *Psychedelic: Optical and Visionary Art since the 1960s*

Forum

Jillian Hernandez and Susan Richmond

Sexing Sculpture: New Approaches to Theorizing the Object

This forum, which originated as a panel at the 2013 Annual Conference of the College Art Association in New York, developed from the following question: how do sculptural practices uphold or, conversely, equivocate the certainties of gendered and sexual embodiment? Having first broached the issue in our own writings on such artists as Lynda Benglis and Rachel Lachowicz, it seemed relevant to us, in a moment in which issues pertaining to gay marriage, queer suicide, intersexed athletes, and transgender pageant contestants—are increasingly dominating news headlines, to assess whether and how other artists and scholars might be responding. We sought out proposals that interrogated how sculpture, and the unwieldy relations it incites between bodies and objects, figured into these sexual politics.

While few of the submissions we initially received for our panel addressed these pressing cultural issues head-on, the contributions we ultimately selected do demonstrate, in a more tacit fashion, a belief in the capacity for sculpture, and particularly abstract sculpture, to enable alternative modes of erotics and embodiment. In drawing different conclusions about the significance of this conviction for both the maker and the audience, as well as for received histories of contemporary sculpture, without exception the contributors we have included here rebuff a common critique that to raise questions of gender, race, and sexuality in nonfigurative artworks is to read too much into them. In their conversation, David Getsy and Jennifer Doyle discuss this very issue at length. As Doyle tellingly remarks: "We do not encounter [art works] in isolation: we bring a history of sensation to them." She cites Senga Nengudi's biomorphic works in this context. In point of fact, the very title of Nengudi's series of sand- and rubber-filled pantyhose sculptures from the mid-1970s, *R.S.V.P*, is a pointed request for viewers to respond to the work's corporeality. Nengudi's dark, pendulous forms invoke the physical resiliency of the human body as well as the increasing elasticity of gender, sexual, or racial labeling.

In similar fashion, a recent series by the artist Lily Cox-Richard, *The Stand (Possessing Powers)* confronts the idealized gender and racial tropes of nineteenth-century neoclassical art, notably as embodied in the sculptures of Hiram Powers. By focusing on the point of contact between the figures and the supporting elements in Powers's work, Cox-Richard generates ambiguously erotic abstract forms that invite but also resist bodily identification. Powers's allegorical figures epitomize ideologies of racial and gender difference in nineteenth-century US cultural discourse. Cox-Richard's perversely partial forms, by contrast, potentially activate the margins, and marginalized subjects, of that discourse. As such, the contemporary artist's engagement with the legacy of a once-celebrated American sculptor inspires larger questions of inheritance and tradition, as well as agency and citizenship, as these issues play out in the social spaces of sculptural representation. In their essay on Cox-Richard's work, Nicholas Hartigan and Joan Kee pay particular attention to how the artist deliberately deploys additions and omissions, presences and absences, in her complex engagement with Powers's originals. They theorize what this approach, with its nod to contemporary tactics of appropriation, contributes to assessing the critical capacities of sculpture today.

Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. 1*, 1977/2003, nylon mesh and sand, 10 pieces, dimensions variable. Museum of Modern Art, New York (artwork © Senga Nengudi; photograph provided by Thomas Erben Gallery, New York)

For Gordon Hall and Rachel Middleman, the legacy of sculptural practices of the 1960s and 1970s continue to generate new and alternative readings, both contributors demonstrating how our familiarity with that era and its key figures is anything but exhausted. In her essay, Middleman proposes that Hannah Wilke's early phallic and labial sculptures, when reexamined in the context of a number of important New York exhibitions dedicated to erotic art in the 1960s, constitute a radical articulation of female sexuality and a provocative alternative to the imagery produced by male artists at the time. Notably, Middleman makes a case for rethinking the significance of Wilke's work as a proto-feminist expression of female *hetero*sexuality, suggesting in particular that the artist's interest in producing male bodily surrogates challenges received histories of early feminist erotica as largely, even solely, concerned with female body imagery from a political rather than sexual perspective.

In shifting the dialogue to Minimalist works that appear to have few or tenuous relations to gendered embodiment at all, Gordon Hall's poetic and pedagogi-

cal "Object Lessons" incites us to engage in dissident readings of sculpture that attend to their queer teachings: "Not primarily because of what we see *in* the sculpture, but because of how these sculptures might enable us to see more generally." The questions Hall raises about visuality are especially timely at a moment when queer publics are crafting nonnormative subjectivities and politics in the wake of the US Supreme Court's repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act. Centering on the work of the artists Richard Artschwager, Robert Morris, and Fred Sandback, Hall's essay demands more imaginative methods for assessing the gender and sexual possibilities augured by art objects.

Since the 1990s, Rachel Lachowicz's sculptural practice has troubled the seeming gender and sexual neutrality of Minimalist aesthetics. Producing abstract works from the hypermaterial and hypercorporeal substances of lipstick wax and eye makeup, Lachowicz marks art objects as contingently gendered. Her work undermines the widely held valences of Minimalist abstraction as universal, ungendered, and value-free by making them specific and giving them names, as in her landmark work *Sarah* (1993), which playfully references Richard Serra's *One Ton Prop* of 1969. Whereas Hall focuses on visuality, Lachowicz's more recent work prompts reassessments of notions of bodily interiority versus exteriority, subjectivity and objectification. In *Cell: Interlocking Construction* (2010), geometric plexiglass shapes are filled with varying shades of blue eyeshadow pigment. The makeup gives "form" to the sculpture, functioning not as surface or adornment, but as its core. Like the camp aesthetics discussed here by Doyle and Getsy, Lachowicz's sculptures refuse to use makeup "properly," and are not ashamed to be perceived as wearing "too much."

Rounding out this forum, Getsy and Doyle weigh in on the significance of queer formal practices and art-historical scholarship. Keeping their conclusions open-ended, the two nonetheless make compelling claims for the urgency of such projects. Their provocative observations recall a proposition voiced by David Halperin, now over a decade ago. In lamenting the normalization of queer theory within academic disciplines, Halperin concludes that the solution to this problem lies not in developing new theoretical formulations of queerness but, instead and "quite concretely, reinventing its capacity to startle, to surprise, to help us think what has not yet been thought."[1]

Jillian Hernandez is assistant professor in the Ethnic Studies Department and Critical Gender Studies Program at the University of California, San Diego. Her essay "Makeup on the Face of the Father: Recent Work by Rachel Lachowicz," appears in *Rachel Lachowicz* (Marquand Books, 2013).

Susan Richmond is associate professor of art history in the School of Art and Design at Georgia State University, and author of *Lynda Benglis: Beyond Process* (I. B. Tauris Press, 2013).

1. David Halperin, "The Normalization of Queer Theory," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45 (2003): 343.

Lily Cox-Richard

The Stand (Possessing Powers)

Lily Cox-Richard, *The Stand (Possessing Powers)*, 2013, installation view, Second Street Gallery, Charlottesville, Virginia, 2013 (artwork © Lily Cox-Richard; photograph by Sharad Patel)

Lily Cox-Richard, details of ***The Stand: Last of the Tribes*, 2010,** plaster, 71 x 22 x 22 in. (180.3 x 55.8 x 55.8 cm) (artwork © Lily Cox-Richard; photographs by Robert Murphy)

Lily Cox-Richard, *The Stand: California*, 2013, plaster, 70 x 28 x 21 in. (177.8 x 71.1 x 53.3 cm) (artwork © Lily Cox-Richard; photograph by the artist)

Lily Cox-Richard, *The Stand: Fisher Boy*, 2013, plaster, 68 x 20 x 20 in. (172.7 x 50.8 x 50.8 cm) (artwork © Lily Cox-Richard; photograph by Sharad Patel)

Lily Cox-Richard, *The Stand: Eve Disconsolate*, 2013, plaster, 69 x 26 x 26 in. (175.3 x 66 x 66 cm) (artwork © Lily Cox-Richard; photograph by Sharad Patel)

Lily Cox-Richard, detail of ***The Stand: Greek Slave*, 2013,** plaster, 66 x 33 x 33 in. (167.6 x 83.8 x 83.8 cm) (artwork © Lily Cox-Richard; photograph by Sharad Patel)

Nicholas Hartigan and Joan Kee

Lily Cox-Richard: On the Powers of Taking a Stand

What does it mean to take a stand for sculpture now? Such is the question Lily Cox-Richard asks in the appropriately titled series *The Stand (Possessing Powers)*. Here she selects, edits, and then re-creates elements of the works of Hiram Powers (1805–1873), the presumptive "father of American sculpture" who helped establish and define the young country's genre of Neoclassical sculpture for domestic and international audiences. In many respects, the reference is anachronistic to the point of disbelief, even for an artist of a generation to whom creation often means the promiscuous cutting and pasting of images without regard to their original contexts. The intensive, almost excessive amount of labor undertaken in the making of these sculptures is yet another indication that this is not appropriation as usual. In looking to Powers, Cox-Richard asks about the strange divide between geography and temporality. His works are widely exemplified as "American" sculpture, yet they are distinctly and even aggressively bracketed from any reflection on what it might mean to be American and modern. Yet Cox-Richard also makes clear that strip-mining the past is not her aim; in her case, it is more productive to consider how something so closely associated with a particular time can be recuperated as an active and dynamic referent, capable of proving its relevance to the present by illuminating the concerns that animate it.

On the face of it, the reference to a specific brand of Neoclassicism can be read as an embrace of kitsch, an easy way to telegraph a sense of history without acknowledging historicity. At this point, Cox-Richard is hardly burdened by the pretenses associated with the Neoclassicism that Powers so assiduously championed. But she nonetheless grapples with the pretenses of an alleged contemporary archaeological turn by means of which certain artists deem it mandatory to champion material that could be seen as archival—as implicitly suggested in her series title, *The Stand (Possessing Powers)*. Are these works meant to be proxies or perhaps stand-ins for Powers's original artworks? Cox-Richard's response is to maintain a kind of literalism about her regard for sculpture as a matter of addition and subtraction. Not only does she break Powers's images into constituent parts, she also pays special attention to the sculptural supports that carry their weight. In Powers's works, these supports exist more from sculptural necessity than formal desire and were designed to complement and hold firm the marble bodies, the principal objects of attention. In the hands of Cox-Richard, these artifacts of sculpture making are abstracted from their historical context and presented as forms that reference the original but also stand on their own, thus prompting the viewer to consider them both as familiar objects made strange by omission and as objects whose relationship to their source material is patently uncertain.

A prime case in point is *The Stand: Greek Slave* (2013), a work based on Powers's most famous sculpture, *The Greek Slave* (modeled 1841–43). Much of the notoriety of *The Greek Slave*, the first American sculpture to receive wide acclaim at home and overseas, stemmed from its association with various social causes, from the Abolitionist movement to women's rights campaigns. Read against this history, the figure—a female Greek slave—is not only stripped bare for display at market but is also defined by the frankness of its—her—availability to anyone who might

find the female form useful. Cox-Richard takes on the availability of Powers's figure by focusing instead on the thigh-high stand on which she leans for support, and on which her tasseled shawl has been draped. The carefully pleated fabric appears to wind around a post or stanchion, while neat rows of tassels coil down the column and spill onto the base. At the top a cushionlike form sits precariously and seems to look out and away from the sculpture, like a cyclopean eye. The extent to which an object such as this may be seen as familiar will depend on the viewer, and while omission is a central theme of Cox-Richard's sculptures, the artworks also depend on strategic additions and edits. Like the plaster from which these objects are made, meaning is created through additive and subtractive gestures. With elements positioned at the edge of their bases, and with ample free space in the center, the works suggest absence as much as they occupy physical space. Each sculpture also includes a point of contact, imagined by Cox-Richard, where a figure would have met the support. Sometimes this is represented by a literal breakage, and at other times it appears as a more subtle disruption to the unity of the form, but in all cases it signals a missing element. Viewing these sculptures as a group makes clear that the choices are deliberate and part of a presentation strategy or system.

Nowhere, however, does the sculpture command the same quality of attention ascribed to *The Greek Slave*; nothing about it calls us to be "spell-bound and almost speechless," as did contemporary descriptions of Powers's work.[1] *The Stand: Greek Slave* makes speech difficult, but only because it looks as if it should be described even though any such attempt is immediately found wanting. The work is invested in its making as a way of highlighting but also complicating its relation to Powers's original. Though made of plaster, it references Powers's marble, which in turn was intended to mimic the texture if not affect, of substances like wood, foliage, crystals, soil, netting, fabric, bark, and snakeskin. Powers first created his sculptures in plaster, and then later relied on studio assistants to help translate and flesh out the work in marble. Cox-Richard mirrors the process through which Powers transformed raw matter into narrative form. Each artist has engaged in the similar action of building up a form and controlling the level of detail necessary to reference or advise some other interpretation of the artwork. For example, for *Fisher Boy* (modeled 1841–44), Powers loosely crosshatched the parts of the plaster model that would later be translated to cascading layers of marble netting. Cox-Richard approximates the level of detail present in Powers's marbles, but since the viewer is not given a side-by-side comparison, there is ample room for slippage from the original. Further, Cox-Richard enlarges the pedestals, so that they can no longer be regarded exclusively in terms of their practical function as supports. Installed somewhat higher than might be expected, these pedestals encroach on the viewer's frame of vision, compelling a sense of scale concerned less with intimacy or confrontation than with muddling the supposed division separating sculpture from other freestanding objects or from viewers inhabiting the same physical space.

Although given a matching coat of plaster, effectively extending the presence and substance of the sculptures, the enlarged pedestals undermine the illusionism suggested by the meticulously detailed figures. Contrary to Powers's grand, monumental allegorizing, we are presented with a viewing experience based on acknowledging that the subject, no matter how allusive, comes to us as nothing

1. Unidentified commentator quoted in *Powers' Statue of the Greek Slave* (Boston: Eastburn's Press, 1848), 26. The unsigned article in which the quotation occurs was originally published in *The New York Courier and Enquirer*, August 31, 1847.

Lily Cox-Richard, "I Sing the Body Electric," detail of ***Strike*, 2012,** installation view, SiTE:LAB at the old Grand Rapids Public Museum, 2012 (artwork © Lily Cox-Richard; photograph by Sharad Patel)

more or less than a sculpted plaster object with an unsure relation to its source material. The literalism of the experience squarely fits within a familiar history of twentieth-century sculpture in which pedestals and bases act as a means to consider not only the extent to which objects are defined by the material conditions of their physical display, but also how pedestals are sculptures in their own right. In *Strike* (2012), Cox-Richard displayed salvaged lightning rods, fulgurites, and found material in the vitrines and showcases of the former Grand Rapids Public Museum, a move that underscored how the autonomy of objects depends on the erection and sustained preservation of a physical boundary separating one from the other. This boundary is reflected in the artist's selection of objects that maintain a historical charge, as one would expect from items in a history museum, despite the difficulty in defining or explaining their relationship to history. *Fruiting Bodies* (2011) more explicitly connects with a sculptural language focused on exploring the dialectic between the ground on which an object rests and a viewer's upright stance. Here, Cox-Richard emphasizes laterality by placing hundreds of resin-cast mushrooms in circles around unmarked graves in the Waupaca County Poor Farm cemetery in Wisconsin. These circles contrast with the verticality of the viewers and the imagined absent headstones, and also make viewers keenly aware of their presence in a historically important space—a cemetery—by mimicking fairy rings.

Here is where Cox-Richard's appropriation falls apart—here, perhaps, is where she takes to task her peers who believe so ardently in appropriation's

Lily Cox-Richard, *Fruiting Bodies*, 2011, cast aqua resin, ht. approx. 5 in. (12.7 cm), diam. approx. 30 ft. (9.1 m), installation view, The Great Poor Farm Experiment, Manawa, Wisconsin, 2011 (artwork © Lily Cox-Richard; photograph by Sharad Patel)

implicit promises of speed and ease. For the question she asks is whether we can only begin to think of sculpture seriously when its constituent elements no longer fuse into a seamless unity, but in fact fall hopelessly apart into related but irrefutably separate elements that in turn cannot be described as anything except sculpture. We might even suspect Cox-Richard of wanting to think first of sculpture's material presence, of its frailty and durability, of its size and scale, before considering its capacity for narrative representation. This is not to suggest that she neglects the latter—the very subtitle of her most recent project, *Possessing Powers*, is a deft jab at a particular history of American sculpture championed for how its exemplars allegedly embody, or at least represent, ideals of fairness as implied by the Abolitionists' promotion of *The Greek Slave*, yet whose parameters are deeply inflected by the systematic exclusion of women and people of color. Likewise, the subtitle may be understood as Cox-Richard's claim to ability, as her desire to supernaturally engage with the earlier artist across time and space, and even as a deferred attempt to suggest that it is she who now claims and even owns Powers.

Lily Cox-Richard, from ***Thicket*, 2013,** artist book, 8½ x 6½ in. (21.6 x 16.5 cm), 38 pages (artwork © Lily Cox-Richard)

At the same time, she urges viewers to undo her own laborious efforts by re-presenting Powers's works as an accumulation of separable parts, each subject to close physical inspection. The intricate craftsmanship of his marbles is present but only so that we may view the representation as a function of physical details. In the 2013 exhibition *Thicket*, held at the Institute for the Humanities at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Cox-Richard displayed a work based on Powers's *Eve Tempted* (modeled 1839–42) in which she reproduced the meticulous scales of the snake by pressing fishnet stockings into wet plaster. She chose,

however, not to re-create the eyes, nostrils, or mouth of the snake, resulting in a snake-head-shaped mass of scales that fades into the other details—creating a sinuous form with contrasting texture that leads a viewer around the artwork and so fulfills its sculptural purpose.

The treatment of these details indicates a deep investment in and attention to making and process, both of which take on particular significance given the sculpture's nebulous relationship with its source material. Such formal decisions compel us to ask "how" questions before the "what." How much detail and of what sort is necessary to communicate the idea of a highly worked surface? How much of a thing is needed to stand in for the whole? How should we understand the hand of the artist, or even the notion of an original, with so much reworking and reimaging? That these questions remain foremost is demonstrated by a small book of documentary photographs that show the artist pinching, poking, mimicking, caressing, and otherwise handling plaster casts of hands standing in for those in *Eve Tempted*. The book also includes a visual examination of Powers's own life-cast hands and elements of his work that not only recall the idea of possessing Powers, but also evokes the inverted dynamics in which a young woman "manhandles" the fruits of Powers's attitudes toward the female form.

The book requires the viewer to pace through these images while holding them, further layering the haptic engagement. In a time when the collapse of sculpture into installation can seem so final as to make even the possibility of considering how and why the two differ seem obsolete, Cox-Richard persists in showcasing the hand. But this is hardly a demand that viewers calibrate the significance of a work to the fact of its being handmade, a point Powers would have heartily agreed to when he distinguished those who regarded the process of making to be as important to sculpture as the finished object, from those for whom the process was but a means to an end. In the latter case, process was mere "*patch work* [that] can be done anywhere."[2] What Cox-Richard suggests is that we rethink sculpture through its capacity to bear traces of having been handled previously, and reassess how those traces invite future handling by an as-yet-unspecified viewer. For her, *The Stand (Possessing Powers)* is a means of figuring out what might be called the reach of sculpture, of exploring the parameters of the psychological and physical realms in which it might dwell.

Nicholas Hartigan is a doctoral candidate in the department of the history of art at the University of Michigan. His research interests include histories of fabrication, monuments and memorials, modern and contemporary art, and urban studies. His dissertation explores the shifting aspirations, rationale, and perceived function of American public sculpture from its boom in the late 1960s until the mid-1990s. He lives in Washington, DC.

Joan Kee is assistant professor in the history of art the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. A specialist in modern and contemporary art, she is coediting a special issue of *Art History* on questions of scale in art history. Her current book project explores contemporary art and its relationship to US law from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Lily Cox-Richard is a sculptor based in Houston, Texas. She is the Critical Initiatives Coordinator at the core program and faculty at Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

2. Hiram Powers to Nicholas Longworth, February 27, 1857, in "Letters of Hiram Powers to Nicholas Longworth Esq., 1856–1858," *Quarterly Publication of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio* (Cincinnati, 1906), 43 (italics in the original).

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Front cover: Heather Cassils, *After,* 2014, 2,000-pound clay bash, remnant sculpture from the performance *Becoming an Image,* Buddies in Bad Times, Toronto, 2014; **back cover:** Heather Cassils, *Becoming an Image Performance Still No. 1*, Edgy Women Festival, Montreal 2013 (artworks © Heather Cassils; photographs by the artist and Alejandro Santiago). See p. 70.