

## TO CLOAK EMPTY SPACE

> A Process of Concealing and Revealing <

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"Space is the sculptor's primary medium, a fact so obvious that it is easy to overlook. Rather than work toward an understanding of how a sculpture both creates and occupies space, we tend to focus on the comprehension of subject matter and on the material qualities of the work of art."<sup>1</sup>

To sculpt is to cloak empty space in material. I make sculptures that wrestle with space, transforming materials and objects into new forms. As I wrap space with a skin, I conceal and reveal the neglected substances around us. Such neglected substances include discarded objects, industrial waste products, or even the air we breathe. Space is often taken for granted because it is foundational to our existence. As Charles Ray suggests, space itself is the essence of sculpture; however, space requires other materials to be seen or noticed. Therefore, to sculpt is also to transform the invisible into the visible. When wrapped in a skin, empty space can be visualized; when framed, the in-between is emphasized. For example, to fill a balloon gives visible dimension to air. Simultaneously, we cannot see the air itself but only the skin that cloaks it. Light reflects off the latex skin that surrounds the invisible space, while the balloon's physical properties provide shape to an otherwise invisible edge between interior and exterior.

## SPACE UNDEFINED

Space is an elusive concept to define, not only due to colloquial and metaphoric uses, but because it is everything and nothing all at once. Space can be described as the dimensions of an object, as well as the emptiness surrounding the object. "Space" seems tangible when measuring distance with rulers, but incalculable when considering the expanse of the universe. To refer to "empty space" narrows the definition, yet remains vague. Experientially, empty space is transparent; a substance we gaze *through* rather than a solid we gaze *at*. Empty space is the in-between, the taken-for-granted, the concealed or ignored substance surrounding the visible objects. But empty space is really filled with invisible gases like oxygen, or particles of dust which remain indiscernible only until those afternoon sun rays hit them at the perfect angle and our understanding of emptiness shifts dramatically. Truly, emptiness is relative to the bodies near it and reliant on the eye of the beholder. Consider the proportions of the bodies and objects moving along the earth, as compared to the surrounding atmosphere and outer space, and notice that this "in-between" substance is really the primary matter of the universe. Additionally, at the atomic level, even the densest matter is composed primarily of empty space.

Though not a scientist, I find myself drawn to scientific fields which favor experimentation and imaginative theory over more practical concerns. For instance, quantum physicists study the world at an atomic scale and the results are often poetic and inexplicable, seemingly the stuff of science fiction rather than science. Atoms move through space in magical, enigmatic ways, requiring a suspension of disbelief. Studies of outer space similarly find inexplicable phenomenon like black holes. And then there is virtual space. We've always had virtual spaces to contend with, like the space of our minds, imagination, and literature, but since the invention of digital technology and the internet, virtual spaces seem to abound. Thus, space seems inclined to evade our understanding forever.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Ray, *A Four-Dimensional Being Writes Poetry on a Field with Sculptures*, 3.

## PERSONAL SPACE

Despite this enigmatic quality (or, perhaps because of it), I think about space frequently. I think about space when rock climbing, as my arms attempt to defy gravity's hold on my body. I think about space when I move into a new home or studio, perpetually shifting objects in pursuit of the perfect arrangement. I think about the metaphoric space that I need from the world, the Internet, and social media. I feel a perpetual compression of space in my mind and body from the surplus weight of options and information available in the twenty-first century.

When immersed in the wilderness, I am hyper-aware of space. Here, the air seems more open, clear, and free. Whether due to the newness of place, the physical engagement of the body, or the open horizons, space feels distinctly different. I recently hiked for four days through the Kanab Creek Wilderness, a canyon in northern Arizona. I encountered massive boulders and slabs of rock lodged at various angles against the canyon walls. One can imagine the terrifying moment when such a slab crashed to the canyon floor. These boulders could have fallen millennia ago, or merely last week, yet we only encounter them in the present moment. They seem simultaneously permanent and temporary, existing within eternity.



*Kanab Creek Wilderness, 2016*

Imagine such a boulder, wedged perfectly between the pinnacle of two canyon walls. Lodged in place by gravity, it seems unmovable; yet as time moves, so does space. Eventually the earth will shift such that the boulder will come crashing to the ground. The portion of empty space below the boulder is significant, because it leaves me suspended between that sense of permanence and transience. I may walk beneath the boulder or stand atop, trusting that it will not fall. I do such things to feel a sense of danger, like I am not in control. The experience is dictated by a desire for the unknown, which fills me with wonder and horror all at once. By emphasizing empty space as an integral and contingent material, I want to invoke a similar awareness in my sculptures.

## MATERIAL SPACE

The experience of making a sculpture is like hiking up a mountain; both involve a challenge to solve, a physical engagement of the body, and a desire to discover something I have not seen before. I am interested in a very real, tangible relationship to the earth through touch, play, and experimentation. Like a lab scientist, I seek to discover something meaningful which will push me along a path of invention toward a better understanding of the world. I am also interested in challenging formal qualities by testing the limits of gravity or the illusion of other dimensions. By cloaking empty space in tangible matter, I reveal the shell of new forms, but conceal internal, cavernous spaces. I filter space through my own



*Sawdust Portrait, 2016*

body's physicality, which necessitates an immersive process in the studio. Each sculpture expresses my phenomenological experience in the world; they are bending under the weight of chaos and decay, yet looking towards the future as a place of wonder, mystery, and possibility.

Every sculpture has a determined fate of its own, dictated by material necessity and formal considerations. For example, the series of sawdust sculptures found its origin in two questions: "How can a sculpture be like a body and a building?" and "how can I use sawdust as a material?" Each sculpture begins with the placement of geometric frames, wire, and found objects, which get swallowed up in layers of wire and paper. Through the mixing of sawdust and various polymers, I create a composite material that is structurally strong, yet light. Empty space is enclosed in sawdust, attiring and fencing off emptiness until it becomes substantial. This impulse to conceal and reveal never ceases—as I contain space I must also puncture it with openings. As the sawdust-clay dries, the forms contract, bend, and fold, bowing to gravity and compressing space. The process transforms these rigid frames into biomorphic entities, with cracked surfaces and openings that provide limited glimpses into interior

spaces. These recurring portals most frequently take the form of a narrow slit or a distinct trapezoid, as seen in both *Sawdust Portrait* and *Blue Portal*. Primarily abstract and expressive, the sculptures suggest cavernous spaces, bodies, and mythical creatures, remaining grounded in the familiar while hinting at the unknown. The distinct barriers between internal and external space allow these sculptures to exist as tiny planets with caves and underworlds in themselves, and the viewer is forever stuck on the outside looking in.

When I use these materials, I start with formal and material considerations, then gradually find myself immersed in the process of making in which forces like gravity and entropy come in to play. Rather than using materials for their cultural context and significance, I select materials based on their physical properties. By treating piano parts as mere building blocks, or thread as lines drawn in space, or sawdust as raw particles, I treat all matter as raw material. This is not a rejection of the historical meanings in objects; it is an intentional choice to forget these histories during the making of artwork so that they



*Blue Portal, 2016*

don't inhibit interpretation and experience. To release objects from their cultural baggage is to give them new life and new possibilities. I enter the studio ready to wrestle with materials; the goal is not to win a battle against the materials and coerce them into tightly pre-imagined forms, but to discover something new as they twist and react against my own interventions. One of my primary concerns in the studio is to

engage in the physical process of making. It's an immersive, tactile sort of process that allows for more intuitive choices, and offers some agency to the material. I always hope to discover something new; I love it when the material seems to exhibit authority, but I also want to challenge the material's limitations.

Each sculpture allows for a sense of connection and familiarity, while also resisting the viewer's full comprehension. For instance, *Blue Portal* synthesizes a trapezoid box with an air duct tube, transforming two recognizable forms into something entirely new, allowing for both familiar associations and a sense of mystery. The rawness and rough texture of the sawdust welcomes visceral responses as well as direct references to landscape and rock faces.

These works are material-driven rather than content-driven. They are not a critique on culture, but rather express themselves as participants in the world, offering new perspectives and possibilities. My thoughts are embedded in the raw materials, the collected objects, and half-finished work lying around the studio. Prioritizing material over content places my work in the field of many of the process artists of the last century, particularly the women recently included in the recent exhibition, *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947-2016*. In a catalogue essay, Anne Wagner writes,

"The point here is not that women make specially muscular or mutable sculpture, but rather that their sustained engagement with a widening range of materials and processes has meant that sculpture can now enact, rather than depict, its own transformational capacities."<sup>2</sup>

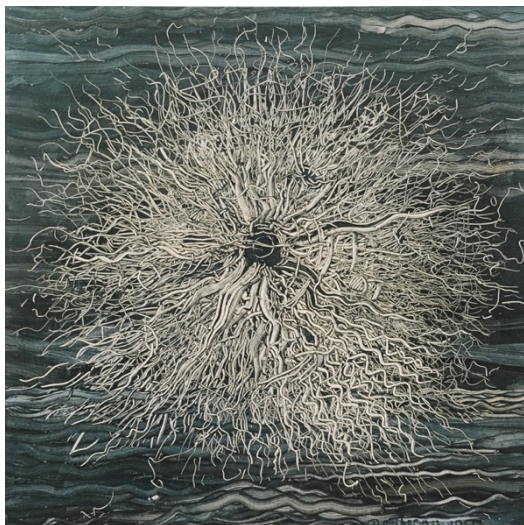
These women demonstrated sculpture's ability to evoke bodily presence without depicting actual bodies. To be immersed in experimentation and a labor of the hand allows for an intimate exchange between artist and material, and new transformations of material. For me, this process of making becomes increasingly radical in an age of industrial society as a way to alter time. When the making of objects becomes unnecessary, it becomes a radical choice, perhaps even a revolutionary act. The sculptures themselves can "enact transformation" because the voice of the materials is active. As seen in the sawdust sculptures, multiple transformations take place: sawdust to composite material, familiar objects to abstraction, rectilinear to biomorphic.

Of the artists in *Revolution in the Making*, Lee Bontecou is a primary influence. Like Lee Bontecou, I resist the urge to over-define the things I make, offering agency to materials and prioritizing invention in the studio. Bontecou's work is remarkable to me because she is willing to trust her materials and intuition in the studio. Her work blends the fantastic and the real, the organic and the mechanistic, as she wrestles with her fascination and fear of technology. She has stumbled upon some of her most innovative techniques through a process of trial-and-error, particularly her notorious use of black soot to create the blackest of blacks. She uses formal qualities like "black holes" not as a conceptual strategy but out of need to express concepts that are ephemeral and enigmatic. Bontecou was inclined to put black holes in her work before she learned conceptually about the black holes in outer space. Perpetually speculative, she is equally fascinated by the observable world of animals and biology as she is about imaginative spaces and fiction. Like Bontecou, my work takes both a fascinated and skeptical view of technological advances, strikes a tension between what we consider the natural world and man-made architecture, and incorporates a variety of openings.

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Wagner, "What Women Do, or the Poetics of Sculpture," in *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women 1947-2016*, ed. Emily Rothrum, (Yale University Press, 2016), 83.





Lee Bontecou, 1987



Lee Bontecou, 1961

## PORTAL SPACE

To work intuitively with materials is to peer into the unknown future. Sculptures with holes are ubiquitous, but not every hole behaves similarly. Bontecou's holes invite the viewer to peer into the void and wonder about the universe. Charles Ray compared a variety of sculptures and the difference between those that treat space as material and space as emptiness.

"Take your cell phone and throw it at a Henry Moore sculpture. It will sail right through the hole. Throw the same phone at the empty space in the middle of David Smith's *Untitled (Candida)* from 1965, and it will bounce right off. It can't go through... Light bounces and is refracted, and the sculpture is held in place by light itself. This sculpture never becomes a frame... The sculpture eats and then retains space as a central element of its relational construction. it's a great example of how exterior space and interior space are really one and the same."<sup>3</sup>

Returning to space itself as the sculptor's primary medium, I incorporate various openings as a strategy to activate an internal space within each object. Like Bontecou, I use these openings as a way to explore the unknown. However, my openings do not invoke a sense of the vacuous "black holes" of outer space, but rather tend to activate empty space, or confuse internal and external space. As the sawdust conceals empty space, the portals reveal and activate the new internal space, so that you can see both simultaneously. These holes are usually in the form of cave-like openings, narrow slits, and the trapezoid frame. Using the term "portal" identifies these holes as transporting devices. Like the screens on our phones, or the wormhole in outer space, a portal can transport something to another time and place. While these holes cannot literally do this, I create forms which allow the imagination to transport. Perhaps a simple hole can become a portal to an imaginary place. Imagining the holes as portals allows them to transcend their physical realities, offering an experience with a virtual or alternative space.

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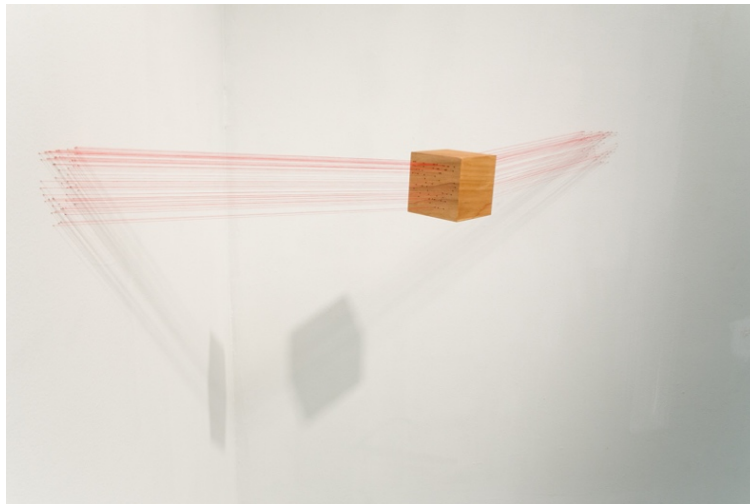
<sup>3</sup> Charles Ray, "There is No Color in the Great Outdoors," in *Raw Color: The Circles of David Smith*, ed. David Breslin. (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 2014), 46.

## VIRTUAL SPACE

"One may discover America, which is actual, or invent a unicorn, which is not. Inventing a trip to the moon is mere literature until we discover a way to get there; the discovery of a unicorn would be very hard news indeed."<sup>4</sup>

I am interested in how people are affected by perceived realities and how to heighten the imaginative realm. Our knowledge is limited by our bodies and experience, but imagination becomes a source of power, allowing us to transcend our own experience and perception of the world. Additionally, as Annie Dillard says, fiction can lead to scientific invention, but simultaneously we may prefer to leave some things in the imaginative realm rather than bringing them to reality. The tension between the physical and fictional is valuable; it causes us to question our experiences and to create meaning within them.

Consider ostensible dualities, like faith and doubt, or religion and science; when we move past the duality



*Punch Card Cube, 2015*

of these opposing forces and merge them together, we find a truer kind of meaning.

Our perception of reality is constantly under construction as we alternate between "real" and "virtual" spaces. I am speaking of the virtual in a multifaceted sense; first, the obvious technological virtual spaces of the twenty-first century like the internet, electronic devices, and social media; second, our virtual thought-world, in which we have spent incalculable amounts of time remembering the past and imagining the future; and third, using architectural/geometric elements

to create enclosed spaces which can behave like the virtual. Elizabeth Grosz describes the virtuality of walls, boxes, windows, and corners:

"Virtuality is not limited to the arena of technological innovation. Perhaps the most conventional of architectural forms and presumptions best illustrates what I understand as the impact, resonance, and richness that virtual brings to the real: the wall. The capacity of walls, boxes, windows, and corners to function in more than one way, to serve not only present functions but others as well, is already part of the ingenuity and innovation of the virtual in the real."<sup>5</sup>

The gallery walls contain sculpture in a real, yet idealized and fictional space. *Punch Card Cube*, a wooden cube suspended by thread in a gallery corner, is dependent on the material limitations of thread, and yet transcends this physical reality in several ways. Viewers consistently find documentation of this work to be disorienting, unsure of whether the sculpture really exists in space or is a 3D fabrication. In person, the materiality removes this question, yet the way in which the thread seamlessly disappears into

<sup>4</sup> Annie Dillard. *Living by Fiction*. (New York: Perennial Library, 1988), 178.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002), 90.

the wall continues to offer a sense of mystery. The threads behave like parallel timelines, which bend as they enter the cube. Unable to see within, one can imagine that the threads intersect with each other. This work is simultaneously a formal experiment and a venture into the virtual realm.

Additionally, the thread is in the pattern of a punch card, considered to be the first computing language. Directly descended from the automatic loom, the punch card represents a connection between textile technology and the industrial information age. The red thread conveys a language that we cannot interpret, and the inability to translate allows the viewer to remain suspended in a space of wonder, between fiction and reality.

## OBLIQUE & COMPRESSED SPACE

"The purpose of the oblique was to encourage a constant awareness of gravity, bringing the body into a tactile relationship with the building. The qualities of the architecture were to be perceived in a sensitive, sensual manner, as people became free to move beyond conventional spatial situations."<sup>6</sup>

I'm interested in the oblique angle. I began to incorporate trapezoids into several sculptures, previously pictured in *Blue Portal*, and more prominently pictured in *Oblique*. What initially appears to be a regular pedestal, reveals a subtle shift from the perfect rectangle to the trapezoid. Two drilled holes instantly activate the internal dark space, and simultaneously behave like eyes or peepholes, suspending the work between architectural and bodily characteristics.

What began as a simple formal investigation into trapezoids, became a philosophical concern with what it means to alter or corrupt the orthogonal. Paul Virilio and Claude Parent wanted to dismantle expectations in architecture for orthogonal angles which require a duality of walls/floors, up/down, and instead incorporate the oblique angle to maximize space and to integrate the body and time more organically into space. They were also interested in disrupting modernist ideals and creating a sense of disequilibrium.

The oblique seems to both negate and emphasize gravity all at once. To walk up a vertical wall one must entirely defy gravity; to walk up a slant must work against gravity but it no longer has any real hold. Further, Virilio was interested in the ways in which technology speeds up time, and therefor alters space itself. Virilio uses term "tele-topology" to examine the way in which instantaneous digital communication accelerates time and causes space to fold in on itself. As the world shrinks, the body takes on more significance; inside and outside become inverted, the body itself becomes the world, and the literal world becomes too small to contain us.



*Oblique*, 2015

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lucan, "Introduction" in *The Function of the Oblique, The Architecture of Claude Parent and Paul Virilio, 1963-1969*, (London: AA Publications, 1996), 5.



"It is the body in time, in a space-time too infinitely compressed for man not to feel a fundamental claustrophobia."<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps these sawdust sculptures can express the feelings of the world at large; feelings of compression and claustrophobia, a body within a shrinking world. Simultaneously somber and humorous, they offer associations for landscapes, bodies, and architecture. *Casual Trapezoid* leans into the wall, one small point barely touching the wall for support. *Compression of the Earth* seems to be bending under the weight of gravity.



*Compression of the Earth, 2016*



*Casual Trapezoid, 2016*

## THESIS INSTALLATION

I have described my work in terms of cloaking empty space, transforming materials, opening portals, and the use of the oblique to integrate bodies and time into space. Each sculpture can stand alone as an individual work, but collectively they take on more animated sensibilities, as if creatures existing together in a space. Like the boulder at the beginning of this essay, I situate each these objects in such a way as to express tension between transience and permanence. Some of these sculptures feel weighed down by gravity; others seem to defy it. In my thesis installation (images below), *Hashtag Sawdust* playfully hangs onto a brick attached to the wall. *Hashtag Sawdust* also offers a window view of *Cloaked*, a more emotive piece that seems to imply both weight and weightlessness simultaneously. The combination of the two intends to create contrast and tension, to allow these pieces to resist each other.

The two most recent works, *Conceal / Reveal* and *Transport / Transform*, both take a detour from the previous sawdust sculptures. *Conceal / Reveal* begins with a solid wooden structure, but the contour steel lines merely offer the idea of a contained space. *Transport / Transform* combines 2 separate sculptures into one; each is leaning towards the other, and it is unclear how they are free standing. No tricks are taking place; instead, a perfect balance has been struck, allowing 2 heavy objects to rely on a single thin steel rod. There is a simultaneous stability and fragility. The blue framed object implies dependency on a wall, but has rejected the support and is free-standing. In contrast to the works which truly cloak empty space, they instead seem to emphasize the empty space without concealing it. The thick skins and the

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Virilio; Sylvère Lotringer and Michael Taormina. "After Architecture: A Conversation," in *Grey Room Number 3*, (Spring 2001): 32-53. JSTOR. Web. 02 Dec. 2015.

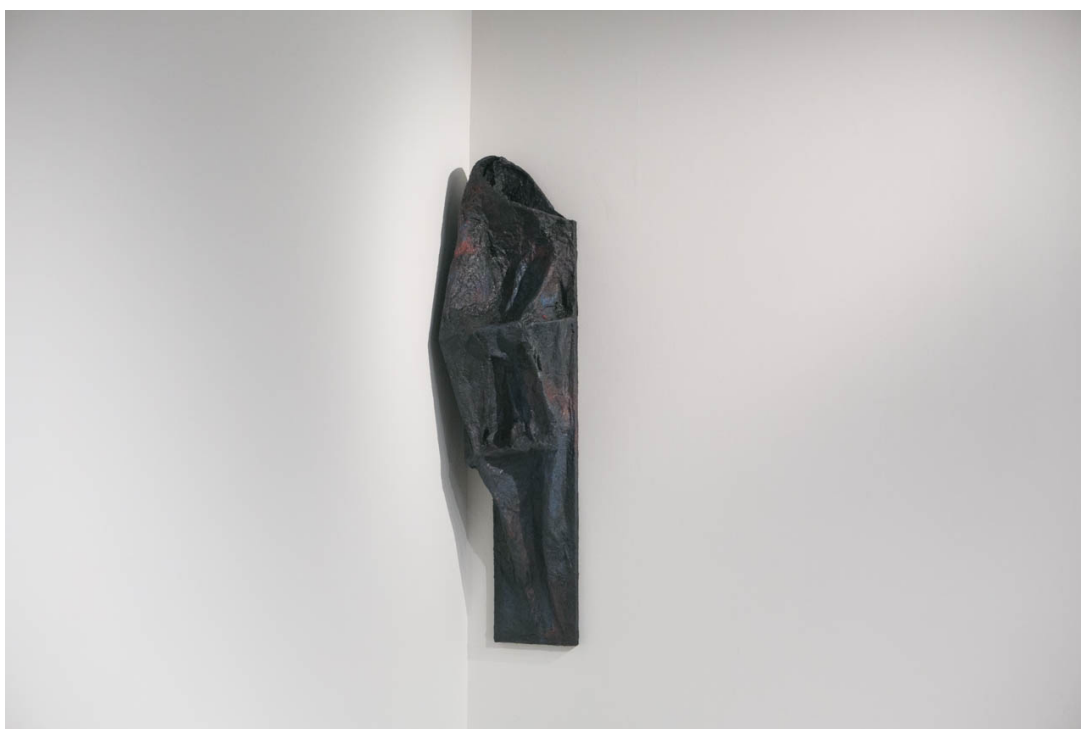
restricted spaces have disappeared. Here, the distinction between inside and outside has been diminished; an uninterrupted flow between interior and exterior allows the viewer to consider that the surrounding spaces are in fact an integral part of the sculpture.



*Thesis Installation at Disjecta Gallery, 2017*



*Hashtag Sawdust, 2016*



*Cloaked, 2016*



*Conceal / Reveal, 2017*



*Transport / Transform, 2017*

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