

“Mustard on the Foot”: A Review of “Jessica Stockholder—For Events” at Hutchinson Courtyard

BY NICKY NI | APRIL 30, 2024



Jessica Stockholder, “For Events,” 2015/2024, plywood and fiberglass, approximately 30 inches x 16 inches, Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Gift of Jessica Stockholder, Kavi Gupta Gallery, and Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery, 2023.17/Photo: Michael Stablein Jr.

If you remember that seminal essay on “International Art English,” the sardonic but astute critique written by Alix Rule and David Levine, published on Triple Canopy, in 2012, “space” is highlighted as one of the most important (but confusing) terms in this linguistic practice, for it “can refer to a rift of entities not traditionally thought of as spatial... as well as ones that are in most circumstances quite obviously spatial.”

Rule and Levine went on and listed other “spacey” terms that IAE is fond of, including “platform,” which, within today’s context, the art world or beyond, doesn’t always describe a physical platform. Its digital and metaphorical siblings are more popular: big techs providing *platforms* for proprietors to sell their products online or for individuals to connect, arts organizations being the *platforms* that support artists and highlight their work, and so on. When we do refer to a physical platform within the art context, most likely during installation, we usually mean a pedestal, a stage, or an elevated area designated to certain programming functions. The platforms dissolve into their functionalities and have no memorable foothold once the show opens; they are neutral and convenient objects that shape an art experience.

But art history also provides many counterexamples. Artists have invested attention in background auxiliaries and support systems—think Brancusi, Scott Burton and the backdrops by Gaylen Gerber. Yes, this list is too white male-biased, so consider the ecological sculptures of Mary Miss, the public projects by Maya Lin, as well as the work of Chicago-beloved Edra Soto. These artists do not focus on the formal gimmick of expanding the canon of fine art objects; rather, they care more about art’s social functions to connect and unite. This list would be incomplete without the name of Jessica Stockholder, whose site-specific commissions and public art extend the pictorial plane

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

to the space (strictly spatial entities) and never cease to captivate her audience with uncommon compositions through which common objects defy their use values.



Installation view of "Led Almost By My Tie," 2007, presented in conjunction with "Jessica Stockholder: For Events" in the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, Regenstein Library, UChicago, 2024/Photo: Michael Stablein Jr.

Since the beginning of April, a serpentine platform has been sitting quietly at the Hutchinson Courtyard on the campus of the University of Chicago. Just over a foot elevated from the stone ground, about thirty feet long and sixteen feet wide, the platform is partially mustard yellow, adding a dash of aspiration for warmer weather; under the sprouting elm tree, its humble but striking presence is an invitation to participation.

The platform is a sculpture by Stockholder called "For Events." Coinciding with the occasion of Stockholder's retirement from the university's visual art department (DoVA), three graduate students, Jenny Harris, Clara Nizard and Michael Stablein Jr., spearheaded the organization of this exhibition and its unfolding programming spanning five weeks, in partnership with or with the support from numerous sectors of the university. Events include performances by Stockholder's former students at Yale and UChicago, such as Anna Tsouhlarakis, Kevin Beasley and Devin T. Mays; campus- and community-driven performances by current UChicago students, selected through a call-for-submission process; and curricular engagements, which are class visits.

The exhibition also includes artworks by other artists as their tributes to Stockholder. For example, the platform is surrounded by a set of like-minded public sculptures by Gabriel Moreno, another of Stockholder's former students. "the air is full," contemplative of pandemic isolation, is a group of rectangular prism stands topped with a mirror surface. When unoccupied, they are the sparkles of the courtyard, breathing pieces of the sky into the ground.

Satellite installations lurk at the Joseph Regenstein Library (recently opened to the public) and the Cochrane-Woods Art Center by the Smart Museum. "Led Almost By My Tie" is a delightful artist's book-sculpture made through a two-year collaboration between Stockholder, poet Jeremy Sigler and printer Ruth Lingen. The artist's book sits on an equally delightful artist's shelf made of an upside-down plastic yellow bin zip-tied to two green steel wall mounts. The ensemble looks joyfully like a cartoony frog head with antenna eyes. Alex Da Corte, who studied with Stockholder at Yale and has applied the latter's colorful palette to theater sets for his performance videos, contributes "Chelsea Hotel No.2" (2010), the first video he's made—and his "love letter to Jessica." In an

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

interview on Cura (Fall 2018), when asked if any of the everyday stuff that Da Corte manipulated in the video, from sliced bread to sodas and to syrupy strawberries, can be seen as “liberated in some way” from their traditional uses, Da Corte quips, “I have been thinking a lot about liberation. Freedom fries. Does Freedom fry?” I think making the video was more liberating for him as an artist, whose hands were seen having a lot of fun playing with the food like a child, than any “liberation” he could have promised to grocery items by pretty much destroying them.

“For Events” is not the first platform that Stockholder has ever made. In 2009, she introduced “Flooded Chambers Maid,” a site-specific foot platform that demarcated an uplifting playground in Madison Square Park in New York City. The following year, she built an expansive pier that accompanied a slim totem of plastic chairs and containers at the Palacio de Cristal of Madrid’s Reina Sofía Museum, titled “Peer Out to See.”

“For Events,” on the other hand, was not commissioned as public art. When it was first exhibited at Kavi Gupta, in 2015, as part of Stockholder’s solo exhibition “Door Hinges,” it was a connector, an interlocutor, “a winding platform” (as described in the press statement) that led the viewer from one group of artwork to the other. This tactic of using an elevated footbridge to connect colonies of works to warp architectural space into a Möbius wonderland nods at the artist’s much-earlier solo exhibition at Kunsthallen Brandts, in Denmark, in 2005. Polarized by a two-roomful body of work, however, the wooden bridge that connected the two galleries didn’t garner much ink in the reviews.

Spotlighting “For Events” in an outdoor context was a curatorial choice. Harris, a Ph.D. student in art history with a research focus on the modernist interactions among visual artists, dancers and choreographers, became fascinated by how performances based on and around this platform could be temporal extensions of Stockholder’s sculpture-image to moving picture. According to Harris, the original platform shown at Kavi Gupta was dissembled upon the show’s closing. (The artist’s solo gallery show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, in the following year, also included a clone of this platform. Let’s hope all materials were mindfully recycled.) However, the design of the platform, which Stockholder realized could be a conceptual piece of itself, was later donated to the Smart Museum as “For Events” (2015). For the occasion of this exhibition—and almost a decade later—the platform was refabricated, locally, by Rooke Hyde from the Logan Center Shops and Nick Raffel, another DoVA alum and student of Stockholder’s.

The lure of Stockholder’s sculptural assemblage and space-bending images lies in their extraordinary arrangements of mundane, mass-produced “stuff”—as in the artist’s words—into aesthetic relations empathetic to human emotions: liveliness, tension, precarity, possessiveness. The “Assists,” for example, are like parasitic kits sucking to a prop-host. In “Door Hinges,” one was hugging an office desk, another, a car. Meanwhile, the platform at Kavi Gupta, freestanding to balance out the other heavy end of the gallery space, was independent, unassuming, and rather monochromatic in comparison. It was one of the few lonely things in that exhibit in which their perceived affordances weren’t being fully reformed or fulfilled.

This outdoor exhibition, however, has provided the platform with opportunities for movement-based experimentations that seesaw with the power of its sculpture-ness. One such instance was the “freemeditation” sessions led by shaman and feifei, two second-year MFA students at the visual art department. Their amusing interactive durational performances explored the boundary of intimacy through rule-based interactions. Power dynamics were at play. Each performance demanded an uncomfortable bodily closeness from the participating audience. At one end, feifei laid out a very low dining table and two tiny stools. A bowl of cooked rice was on the otherwise empty table top. feifei sat on one stool and used chopsticks to pick at the rice, eating only one grain at a time. Curious audience members were welcome to eat with feifei as long as they followed the same eating principle—one grain at a time. Disposable chopsticks were provided, but you’d better not think too hard about the fact that you were transporting an equal amount of saliva from your mouth to the bowl after the first rice grain. “If you are concerned about food hygiene (sharing rice), feel free to observe :),” a notice courteously suggested.

shaman, on the other hand, embraced maximalism. They provided a table full of red items that are—in theory—edible: packaged food such as Jell-O and chewing gum, red condiments including tomato sauces and chili sauces,

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

and raw meat. Participants were invited to feed any items in any combination and amount to shaman, who was seen wearing a red sweater and a VR headset and painter's-taped to a chair, livestreaming their masked face through a smartphone propped up in front. Also in front of them were two packs of cigarettes. Upon the organizers' approval, I proceeded to "feed" shaman an American Spirit under the condition that I held the cigarette. For the duration of this cigarette break, I was this "nondiegetic" hand that occasionally intruded the pictorial frame of shaman's livestream with a cigarette that they puffed at. The artist's zany red lipstick was transferred to the cigarette butt then to my index finger. For a moment, I became the support system, the prop for a prop, the assist. I didn't stay for the whole performance, and, to my knowledge, no raw meat was fed. When I circled back, I saw shaman already emancipated from the painter's tapes that bound them. When I wondered if they violated their previously self-imposed rules, they said, "I realize I'm free."

For events, the platform takes the backseat, resuming its duty of bearing the weight of the performers. Its literal presence sings a symbolic song—a most honorable and humble metaphor for the work of the teachers. This exhibition is a well-deserved tribute to Jessica Stockholder, a highly respected educator who has devoted her life to teaching generations of artists, elevating them, *platforming* them, and making sure that there will always be more people equipped with the power to transform and inspire, the people that we call artists.

"Jessica Stockholder: For Events" is on view at Hutchinson Courtyard, 1131 East 57th, on the campus of University of Chicago, through May 5. Closing performances "Hansel and Gretel, a collective tribute to Pope.L" by DoVA alumni will take place May 4–5.