

ROBINSON, KATHLEEN L., M.F.A Unruly Gestures  
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In a search to connect more deeply with my environment, sense of place and what it means to care for it, I construct teetering, suspended structures that investigate the complex, sometimes invisible links between all things. Inspired by moments of odd ingenuity that happen when the typical solution breaks down, I work without a fully predetermined pattern or set of plans, piecing together wooden scraps, strings, matchsticks, broken glass, and other found objects, responding to space and material relationships as they develop. Working this way leaves the pieces vulnerable to each other and external forces. If one part fails, so do many others. In my practice, I reference ecosystems and the intimate relationships that form webs between parts in an effort to mimic and embody those ties, those webs of interconnected relationships, so I test, react and intuitively construct pieces until a whole emerges.

UNRULY GESTURES

by

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

I find myself surrounded by patchiness, that is, a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life, with each further opening into a mosaic of temporal rhythms and special arcs.  
-Tsing, 2015, 4

I am inspired by the odd, small moments I come across in the world. They come in the form of surprising solutions to problems, distinct ways of doing that could only happen because a particular person in a particular place found a particular way of seeing, acting, solving. Idiosyncratic traces of human ingenuity at its best. I walk down a small side street in Ljubljana , Slovenia in June 2015. It opens into a square with a café and some quiet shops. Dangling above where the streets intersect, a spindly chandelier of sorts is suspended by wires. The lightbulbs are there, but so small they couldn't possibly give off much light. These are the gestures that fascinate me. They can be careful, hasty, awkward, intimate and funny. These are not moments of world changing engineering, but often the results of how when the "right way of doing things" breaks down. This is when our ability to solve problems by our own means emerges, engaging us in our surroundings more deeply and revealing ourselves to them. The result is in moments that take me by surprise, make me laugh, and at the same time can hold haunting beauty. One thing is constant: the life pulses that guide us are visible when order breaks down, when the automatic system of doing or seeing is thrown aside. When the convenience of what we take for granted is taken away, we have to look

around us to find a solution. The drainage pipe to the gutter on my house is propped in place by a brick underneath. My landlord calls it fixed. Instead of finding a door that actually fits, my front door has an extra middle hinge unattached to anything, and is about an inch too short, but she screwed a flap to the bottom so it fits. Really more of a swinging door for camel crickets, but I love these solutions.

In *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, anthropologist, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing suggests that in the midst of what she deems “capitalist ruin” caused by mindless, large-scale exploitation of resources in effort to concentrate capital gain, we are left in an increasingly precarious world, where these economic systems have failed us, and simultaneously destroyed the ecosystems we once relied on and engaged with. We are in a world “without handrails” and it’s time to allow curiosity to guide the way, opening the possibility of new ways of thinking and action. Allow our gift of ingenuity to take control over the mediocrity of mass consumption. This is the same sort of precarious ingenuity that fascinates me in daily encounters with the world. It’s in these moments I find hope.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist and poet, talks about her love of the natural world. In it she discusses the balance of ecosystems like a traditional Three Sisters garden, It looks to the Western eye, like a tangle of weeds, but in reality corn, squash and beans all have attributes that the others need. They grow so well together because of deeply entangled relationships that benefit all parties.

In my own work, I reference these ecosystems by working in a way that seeks to find reciprocity of relationships in a world that centers on consumption. I want to mimic and embody those ties, so I test, react and intuitively construct pieces until a whole

emerges. Working this way allows me to question systems of uniformity through mass-production of everyday objects that undermine the richness of individual ingenuity and engagement with our environments. By this I mean that in a culture of one-time-use, ready-made convenience, we don't think about the processes our food, clothes and products come from. The problem solving of everyday life is done far from us on massive scales, disconnecting us from figuring out individual solutions to small questions. We don't think about getting water from point A to point B or what it takes to get that sweater from plant or animal based material into the form of a wearable piece of clothing. At risk of failing and not taking the most "efficient" approach, I choose to work in favor of personal ingenuity and curiosity to engage more deeply with my space and environment, attempting to breathe new life into what we throw out.

This has found me in a risky, slightly terrifying place where the resolution of my work is defined in part by how open-ended its outcome, at risk of having everything collapse. I have forced myself to work "without handrails," unlike any other discipline I have engaged with. While I constantly experiment and try to form some plan for new spaces, I never know exactly what the next step is going to be, nor do I have a certain or structured method for what and how I use each material. This allows me to continually reevaluate and reassign roles to each material, and find new ways of making connections.

In a world that is no longer just defined by natural systems (and our own vulnerable place within them), where and how we locate ourselves in it is ambiguous, so how do we find belonging? And without belonging, how can we care about a place? These questions have been the result of an ongoing investigation into how complex relationships can form from what may start as seemingly individual moments. My

ingenuity is tested each time I enter into a construction blindly. By allowing the materials and environments to be my guide, and depending on imaginative decision making outside of a predetermined set of rules, the results have opened up more and more possibilities, questions and revelations.

One of the most personally significant realizations I've come to is that the immediacy necessary for decision making is constantly at odds with the delicacy of some materials and relationships. An overall reality of the way I work is that I test boundaries out of curiosity, and even though I try to foresee the possible effects each connection will have on the rest, sometimes I push too far and the whole thing collapses. Sometimes what I think will protect the integrity of the balance is not enough. Nature (in this case a combination of gravity and physical possibility that each material holds) ultimately dictates the limits of what I can do. When I don't listen to the materials, and instead build too large or too fast, I fail in the role of a curious cultivator and it all will collapse. When I lose myself in them, disregard the "product," and explore each part with care and curiosity, they become more stable and greater than the sum of their parts. Keeping the whole outcome in mind is important but not at the expense of the ability to focus and care for all the parts as I figure out how to get there -or even where "there" is.

## CHAPTER II

### NO PATH TO FOLLOW

As kids in the mountains of southeastern Tennessee, my sister and I were set loose in the woods more often than not. In reality we knew our stomping grounds inside and out, but in our minds we were explorers of uncharted worlds. We didn't want to follow the hiking trails back home. Instead, knowing home was in a general direction, we would set off straight up a steep ridge in the woods, the opposite direction from how we had gotten there. We usually got caught in dense thickets of mountain laurel. They were difficult to navigate, but also filtered soft sunlight onto moss through their winding limbs. This was fairy territory. We traversed boulders unsure of whether we could get down. And that's the genius of childhood: the fearlessness we achieved through the gnawing urge to test boundaries, allow curiosity and imagination to set us in other worlds, on new courses, while deeply engaging with our surroundings. The world is infinitely more varied and beautiful for the change and adaptation required of us.

When we weren't outside we would build Disney Worlds for our stuffed animals, taking over rooms of my parents' house in ongoing construction projects. Cardboard sky lifts and roller coasters suspended across the room and wound over any surface that could hold them. Building blocks, shoe boxes, empty space on the bookshelf and every toy we had ever collected joined in to play their part. We made tiny arcade games, haunted houses, Ferris wheels and petting zoos. There was never an ultimate outcome we were trying to achieve, just the fascination with what we could figure out.

Alexander Calder's *Circus* embodied these ideals of childhood and inventive solutions in his handmade mechanical circus friends. While they were intricately engineered objects of great care, they were not perfect. Sometimes as he performed them, they missed their marks, etc. I like them better for knowing this. But in them is reflected Calder's unapologetic curiosity about the world that he cultivated throughout his adult life. He gives permission for serious play. The piece is casual in a sense and messy - Calder makes no effort to hide his involvement in moving the actors, etc. At the same time it is so intricate and methodical in the attention to the act of setting up and preparation of the routines. He sets up a wire and fabric man in the ring. The man has a tube hidden in him, ending at his mouth. Calder smokes a cigarette stuck in the man's mouth from afar, by breathing in and out of the tube. Then the little man inflates a balloon. Calder's role is not seamlessly hidden. We know he is blowing into the tube and making this simple trick happen. But his commitment to the circus and his little world allows us to suspend reality and enter the world with him. It's this dedication to serious play that inspires me, and his hand-made inventions.

In the mindset of "serious play," I am able to enter into my own constructions. From the wall a three-foot long 2" x 2" board reaches down at a 45 degree angle. A small slice into the bottom corner leaves a notch for it to perch on a hot pink tightrope that spans the room. The top of the wood is attached with two matchsticks at the very top. Points of red announce their strained stake on the spot. The matchsticks cannot hold the weight of the beam alone. The hot pink lifeline straddled by the foot of the wood, then, becomes just that – a lifeline - not only to the wood, but to the integrity of the matchsticks. The wood in this sense becomes a physical connecting force of tension between the two smaller elements. This shared task the matches and string together

uphold awkwardly stabilizes the sloped platform, allowing me to seek and cultivate other relationships form here.

A whitish thread stretches down a short distance where it wraps around one end of a broken mechanical pencil. A clear tube fits over this end, dangling over nothingness, ready to redirect whatever fluids broken mechanical pencils leak out. The pencil, in turn, intersects a dark piece of wood, hot pink eraser end of the pencil-dowel caps it safely so it won't fall. Rock candy windshield glass bits make for vaguely sinister glitter. Often parasitic, it still gives back to security of the piece by stabilizing its host.. Past the pink end of pencil a matchstick joins a two inch bit of wood that, hosts another matchstick on its adjacent side, connecting a double-sided shard of mirror. String to matchstick to wood to pencil to wood to matchstick to wood to matchstick to mirror to string back up to another rope that spans the room, this one white. The bottom of the mirror is held tight by a grey string strapped with a failed orange thread that reaches and grasps the white rope. Glass glows from its broken edges.

As these webs of relationships form, they always grow towards each other. Gesturing, wrapping around, pulling one another upward or holding them in place. They never grow strictly apart. And it's rare to have any piece that is unaffected by its surroundings.

## CHAPTER III

### PROGRESSION OF WORK

When I moved to Greensboro, NC in 2014, my work was rooted in describing real objects in space on two-dimensional surfaces. As I began experimenting with three-dimensional collages, I began to let go of representation in service to using the materials themselves in real space. My practice no longer had to be directly representational because the materiality and how I use objects became more important.

My practice has always been deeply rooted in drawing, and I continue to draw. I was doing drawings of industrial spaces, like the steam plant on the UNCG campus. Testing two-dimensional space and finding connections and moments of detail in larger atmospheric spaces. I also drew machinery in the woodshop and foundry, taking apart the machines with my observations, figuring out the connections between parts.

In conjunction with structural experimentation, I began to collect and catalogue small found-objects that I stored in audio cassette boxes. Leaves, bark, bottle caps, seed pods, eraser tips, notes found fluttering down the street. They were daily entries of my life and posed questions about my habits, curiosities, relationship to environment and this underlying question of belonging. I collected over a period of five months, beginning in February through July.

These partly served as explorations of how even the most distant-seeming objects have a connecting factor of some kind (what is the relationship between bright yellow corroded batteries and a spidery bundle of lichen?), but also became formal

compositions at times, and began to hold more power in the collection as a whole and as a cataloguing experiment..

My material experiments began to move toward kinetic ends. I made cardboard toys with wings that flapped by means of a simple hand-crank. I started installing pieces behind doors or tied to cabinetry, etc. I was fascinated with the idea of how to tie everyday activities like the opening of a door, to something more than mundane, something surprising. An everyday act that you don't even think about becomes a chance to be surprised.

After returning from the Venice Biennale in August of 2015, I made a pop-up book with these principles in mind. I wanted to know what it meant to be able to work in the expanding and contracting space between pages. I used materials collected from the time I spent traveling to collage and draw and paint images onto the pages, cutting them and finding ways to encourage the viewer to move through the pages in whatever direction they wanted, finding connections without an explicitly explained narrative. It didn't need to be linear, only guided by curiosity and the odd ways I found connections between sets of spaces in the book.

I had traveled to six cities across Europe with two of my classmates. Navigation and renegotiating what we knew was a big part of getting around. Much in the way I spent my childhood, testing the bounds of what I knew in the woods, we spent a lot of time figuring out how things worked in different places across Europe. Trains, buses, boats, car shares with loud friendly Slovenian giants to get across a border to Croatia and on to the next bus station. How do we buy groceries in Budapest or Plitvice? How do we interact with people differently? What is required of us in this new space? Each new situation demanded of us a renegotiation of what we would take for granted

normally, allowed us to re-engaged in our surroundings, find connections to the people and environments around us, and move through curiosity. These were the ideas the book explored through pop-up and kinetic means. It is something I intend to return to moving forward, as elements of this way of thinking have begun to crop up in my installations.

## CHAPTER IV

### TREASURE HUNTING

In the 2015 Venice Biennale, Sarah Sze had an installation hidden away past the Armory in an overgrown garden surrounded by a ten-foot brick wall. It would be easy to pass by without a second glance, but if you went in, it was full of surprises. By her standards it was a fairly quiet installation. A single candle in some sort of vice grip continuously swung back and forth at the end of a string, the only piece that was in motion. In the center of the whole garden a confusing second inner brick wall, also ten-feet high, stood without any entry point. The only visible art interference was a blue string suspending a brick, one on each side of the cylinder. Following the path around, you came to the back wall. In a crack that meandered up, folded blue bits of material were jammed in there all the way up. Perched at the top of the wall sat a convex mirror used to see around corners in parking decks. The mirror is easy to miss and it was only when I slowed down that I did. It was the solitary entry point into that curious central structure. You get one glimpse of the blue hammock woven and suspended across the interior of the space (A first hammock, riddled with bits of orange yellow, red paint bits also hung on the right as you entered). It didn't matter so much what was inside, but how it awakened my curiosity so intently by being first denied to me and then only revealed through an image, the mirror reflecting it. We were kept separate from it, but it was revealed to those who took the time and were willing to search.

My own practice diverges from hers in that the process of responding to space in real time, almost a performance to myself, is different from her very strategically planned approach with tiny models. Because of her background in architecture, too, she has a very methodical approach. The work seems to be less about testing the physical possibilities of materials than the organization of them in a space.

I was introduced to Helen O'Leary's work a couple of years ago, as well. While I haven't experienced them in person, it has opened so many possibilities for me. She deals in abstraction, creating what at first appear to be rickety ill-fitting panels or spindly linear structures. But when you look closer, they are the product of very deliberate joining, painting, cutting down and re-assembling pieces until she finds the construction she wants. I am deeply moved by the evidence of process and hand-manipulated care that emerges in pieces that are both vast and intimate at once. It is this possibility of finding within a process, a deep connection to materiality, linearity and intimacy in expansive spaces that captures me. My own work has very different connections to materiality, almost fleeting, as I move between found objects, but I still approach them with care, curiosity about what they can do, how they fit into the bigger picture? How can I find surprises in them? Both Sze and O'Leary's works, allow for surprises as you spend time with them.

In my own work, none of the materials I use root us in a particular place by their nature alone. They all have a history, as discarded objects, but they are mass produced, throw-away. The occasional brand name or industrial design characteristics are the only distinct features. Wood, an otherwise natural material has been denatured, stripped of much of its identity. So what tells us of the environment these objects come? What is their place, their history? Sometimes it's just a brand name, an advertisement to send us

back for more of the same uniform, throw-away convenience. Color, advertisements, material and texture are all still there. But they could be from China or China Grove. Collecting is still a daily practice, eyes open for interesting color, form, texture. I start to touch, test, feel, and pair objects to set off a structure. Test, collect, stitch, wrap, pair, test, test, suspend, test. These initial pieces may or may not end up being the keystone parts of a given section but they are at least a catalyst from which parts can grow from and back into. Or collapse in a heap on the ground if I don't listen carefully to the relationships between materials.

Connecting to the space itself is important early on. Without a lifeline through the space, some initial reaction to the environment, nothing can grow in it. When you hinge things with matchsticks, they often wiggle out without a second source of stability. So the next step is to find other connections to the little world as it emerges.

The scale of this body of work lends itself to a tiny imagined world. This sort of scale lends itself to the small gestures I reference in the world. You have to look for them. They are intimate moments that in order to notice, you have to search for within the larger construction, which is more expansive. A large series of small-scale interactions. Without planning, some sense of foresight is still necessary. This is the more human side of working, in a way. If I'm going to start a life line across or through the space, I string or tie on additional materials (beams or planes or even just loops) in anticipation of what's to come. Leaving opportunities for the emergent systems to grab hold and continue to grow into the larger piece.

CHAPTER V  
CONCLUSION

Moving forward I hope to find space to work in for longer amount of time. I want to work in ways that push the possibility of scale. And I want to explore further how my surroundings could, in fact, change the materials I am using. As well as the possibilities for where and in how many ways the work can be installed. I intend to continue my search to better understand interconnectedness and engagement to environment through ingenuity and small moments that leave me surprised. Finding these moments is not hard to do, but it takes a curious eye and a willingness to engage in the spaces that verge on daily chaos, moments of breakdown to open up new possibilities. I'm looking for new ways to throw out what a hinge is meant to be used for. After all, why does a chandelier have to be used for light? And why should a door have to fit perfectly into its hinges?

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