

The following is an edited transcript of an artist's talk for Autumn Ahn's *on the genealogy of forms*, hosted April 21st, 2024 between Autumn Ahn and Ben Chaffee, with lower_cavity's Anthony Discenza moderating.

Anthony

Thanks everyone for coming. The projects in this space, along with the metal works in the lower basement are the work of Autumn Ahn, who's been in residence for the past month or so. She's based here in Western Mass; she and I had done a couple of studio visits over the course of the past year before I invited her to come do something here at lower_cavity. Autumn has been working extensively in the space, as you've just seen.

As a part of this new project, we thought it would be nice to do a talk, and so I've invited Ben Chaffee, who is the Associate Director of the Center for the Arts at Wesleyan University, and the curator at the Ezra and Cecile B. Zilkha Gallery. Ben is a good friend, and I thought he would be an interesting person to put in conversation with Autumn.

Because it's such a small group, we can make this more of a conversation between all of us, if people are down for that. If it seems appropriate, feel free to ask questions or comments.

Ben

Thank you, thanks for having me here.

As Anthony said, I'm happy to be interrupted with questions. I prepared a little bit, but Autumn and I met for the first time about 30 minutes ago, so I'm coming in cold. But we all got warmed up just now by a phenomenological experience here in the space, so we maybe we can jump right in.

Autumn sent me some materials ahead of time that talk about how this work connects to past projects. She also pointed me to other thinkers that connect her practice to different discourses and ideas. I did my homework, but this is my first time seeing the work in person. Maybe we could start with what we just experienced, rather than starting with the title or going into language.

One of the things that occurred to me right away with this project, that connects to everything else I've seen of yours (mostly online) is this balance or interplay

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between what we might call an armature or a non-responsive material, and a sensitive or responsive material. For example, metal and paper together form a kind of binary, at least in terms of our ideas about how both materials operate in space. Obviously, metal is malleable, as well, but at room temperature it's more or less static. The experience of this work put those conditions into direct performance, if you will, with the paper and the steam also becoming responsive to the pipe hung in front of the armature. How do you think about that relationship?

Autumn

Hi everyone, thanks for being here. I should preface that we're all experiencing this work together, including myself, for the first time. There's a level of reward I'm feeling because so much of it was based on using parameters like spatial orientation and studying the nature of the steam before doing any kind of mark-making—which is how I'm seeing the paper and the metal in the space, as orienting or locating a certain kind of mark. What we all saw together was how that 'mark' moves or responds, and it's not fixed in a particular way.

I think the framing of the work is based on time: I usually work around the idea of something being static or not static through the element of time. Positioning all those materials alongside each other in a way that neutralizes or removes any hierarchy between them results in questions like, 'how long is this material going to be with us?' Or 'how long is it going to stay the way that it is?' Using that framing, something may be more fleeting than another thing. But that other thing is also aging; all parts are moving towards the same end.

Ben

Right, the metal will also not be static over time, right? It will also change, rust, and eventually disappear.

Autumn

The metal looks so fixed and so rigid when it's standing there. But these forms are actually unsteady; they're light. None of the metal pieces in this space are heavier than five pounds. They wobble. I think that hidden aspect of the material is something that helps me relate to it in these situations.

Ben

Do you consider then time to be a material itself in the work? Or do you think of it as rather an element that helps you reframe how you think about how other materials operate, or both?

Autumn

Both are involved, but I think it's neither. It's not really a collaborator, because I feel like I'm also subject to the same conditions. I'd say it has more of a humanizing effect; it takes away this dominance that I have as a person with consciousness amidst a world containing many other objects. I'm interested in that hierarchy being dismantled in one way or another. It leads to certain questions that help me reframe the way I think about people and things.

Ben

So getting away from 'agency' as a term—rather than thinking about you being an agent, or this being subject to your agency, the work has its own access to time and is moving in time, as are you?

Autumn

~~Yeah,~~ I think that came out of the process of building things. For example, when you touch a material or try to force it to do something that you want it to do, you either run into confrontations that make it really challenging, because your will is demanding that it needs to look like a particular thing, or you can negotiate with it along the way. I think my approach has tended towards the latter, where the responsiveness of the materials to me, and myself to the materials, becomes a much more interesting intellectual exchange. It also becomes a more embodied exchange, where my dominant perspective of the thing needing to be a particular way no longer really exists. Both the material and I are headed towards this space where the concrete is still a future concern. And that is a site of tension that I think is more alive, more exciting.

Ben

One thing I also started noticing in your work was how important positionality was. Certainly, the way the steam is set up in relationship to the stone, to the paper—it seemed very intentional. But there's also the positionality of the reflective material relative [of the arc work] to the light, and even the pieces downstairs have certain angles at which they become different volumes or shapes. Do you think about that as more related to mark-making in drawing, or are you thinking about that as more related to performance or movement in space? Or to an audience? The way you were speaking earlier sounded more like mark-making was a positionality, and it had a relationship to drawing.

Anthony

Autumn and I were talking about that last night—how, rather than thinking about this in terms of sculpture, it's more about thinking of drawing and mark-making. Maybe that's a nexus between drawing and performance—something that is performed. These works, although they feel sculptural, I think for [Autumn], they sit much more at a nexus of drawing and performance, or at least an expanded sense of both of those things.

Autumn

Yeah, I think expansion is an important word there, because what I just described speaks to this undefined relativity to the thing or the process or the environment. It's similar in that drawing is informative as a technical tool that we use to locate certain things or document certain things. I think the act of mark-making is probably more specific to my needs than the act of drawing as a discipline. What I prioritize is that the body is performing simply by default of being in the space; how can I render that movement as something inherent to the site of the work—something that exists prior to the work occupying it?

By flipping that narrative, there's a way to incorporate different tools I have at my disposal—whether that is my experience working with perspectival drawing, say, or different experiences I've had with certain materials or construction processes that can now be applied to this total experience.

When I talk about this, it can sound like I'm being vague, but I feel a certain respect for the ambiguity of those collisions, of the noticing, and that location just requires certain gestures to allow it to stick around long enough for us to be able to see it again and return to it. So, I think the positionality that you're noticing, with the placement of objects, there's a sensitivity that's needed to even recognize those things—not just from me; it's also for the person walking up to it. They need to be able to (or want to) pay attention to certain things. I guess the whole concept of listening with the whole body is a very subtle but important difference. Where listening is not just with your ears but is a whole sensory process or practice.

Ben

You described in some of the writing you shared with me your interest in privileging not knowing, or a process of coming-to-knowing through one's body—positing a kind of epistemology based on our experiences in our body, versus a cognitive or mental way of knowing, which resonates with me. Coincidentally, this is how I tend to live my life as much as possible, but it's also not really a way that culturally, in the West, we are trained in as a way engage with the world. One might assume that maybe that's how artists are trained to be artists, but I don't think that's even necessarily the case in art school. So how did you how did you find your way into that relationship to material or knowing, and how did that come into your artistic practice?

Autumn

I think when you mentioned binaries earlier, it also relates to this question. It probably involves some personal history, because I was raised in this country was as a first generation Korean American; I'm the first in my family to be born here. So that has lent itself to a mode of thinking that necessarily involves having two very opposing realities—culturally, intellectually, spiritually, and physically.

I think for a long time, that felt like an opposition, a sort of confrontation. So much of that involved, for example, following a certain path in school or training, so I ended up going to a fine arts program that was ~~very~~ Western, conservatory-style academic oil painting training. When you're studying oil painting academically, you're also made to work very technically with sculpture and clay and wire. You get almost a tradesman-like skill set of material knowledge of all these incredible tools

that help you represent something from life in two- or three- dimensional ways. And that is a very powerful form of translation.

But within the whole concept of these disciplines, you need to follow certain rules in order to do it; you have to be willing to allow yourself to be submissive to those practices, so that you can embody them and have them be natural to you. At a certain point, there's a level of unlearning, this rejection or resistance that we all go through, either through some maturation or whatever.

I've come to think of it as just making peace. I don't want the confrontation. I've gotten to a place where I think it's unnecessary and not especially useful to think about things being in direct opposition, because there are so many other ways to think about these relationships. That's only possible when you take yourself out of a Western capitalist framework, or the kind of psychological spaces you end up in when you are trained to perform a certain role in society. That's not only Western—that's in every society; there are social hierarchies or roles that people play, or are expected to play, and that can lead to certain problems: repressions or oppressions of your own complexity.

I think humanizing that for myself—experiencing some level of compassion or empathy emerging from an understanding of what I'm looking at— can lead to a more interesting exchange, where you're thinking about moments where difference is generative for something other than yourself.

When you're thinking about the future or possibility so much, it's important not to just grab onto that and project it onto your will. That's what I meant earlier by tension; there's this perpetual exchange between the urgency to see something and the patience to step back and allow something to be open. Hopefully the work itself doesn't feel like it sits at either one of those ends—maybe that's what I'm calling that 'electric feeling' or the 'aliveness' in these static forms I was describing earlier. I'm still finding language to describe that and trying to rely on the body to help inform all these decisions. Every step of the process, whether it's arranging or placing or situating is a lived moment. I think that's where the phenomenological comes in, where lived experience gives some perspective on the dynamic of truth that I'm most captivated by.

[audience]

You were talking about mark-making earlier. It's just a term I'm not familiar with. Say for example it was paint instead of steam coming out of the pipe. Would that be more obvious mark-making or am I still misunderstanding?

Ben

No, it's good question. Mark-making is just an open-ended way to refer to the act of making a mark on another surface. For example, drawing, writing would all be mark-making, painting could be. It starts to become a little bit different when it's... viscous.

Anthony

Painting is something can be thought of as something that is built up of marks, if you think of a relationship between mark and gesture, but I think some of the way we've been talking about it here is pushing that boundary. If you think of a mark, there's a gesture or a movement that's recorded materially in some way, but it doesn't have to be physical material. This is something that I think about a lot, and I think it's something that you [Autumn] think about as well. When you say artists work with materials, the traditional way of thinking about that is paint and stone and charcoal, watercolors, you know, maybe even photography. But I think the challenge is to think about materiality in a very expanded way. Something that is immaterial could still be a material that an artist is working with, and performing with, or inserting a space of mark-making into. If you think of an artist who maybe has more of a socially-oriented practice, the materiality that they're working with might be a social system—but it's still something that you are in a process of engagement with.

This is a weird source for a quote about art, but the writer Raymond Chandler (who wrote all the Philip Marlowe detective novels) observed that ~~there's no~~ there's no art without the resistance of the material. The idea is that the material, whatever it is, is pushing back against your intention, and there's a dynamic there. I think this is a useful anchor point: if you can have an expanded sense of what might constitute a material, then you can also begin to think in an expanded way about mark-making.

[audience]

Cool, okay. I'm thinking everything is a file.

Autumn

I would like to respond to your question too. When you described having paint coming out instead of steam, I think that would be another way to understand mark-making—I don't think anything's off bounds. To me, this is the point of mark-making; that anything can make a mark, including you, including your breath, like when you're breathing in wintertime. That can also be seen as a mark, even if it's an ephemeral mark, a fleeting mark. It's something that shows you that you were there, or that something was there at one point. The way I deal with marks has a lot more to do with that sense of time. In this case, my focus has been playing with forces, something immaterial that you can't necessarily always see physically. Maybe it's something you feel; I think that's where this sense shows up. The wind is something that you “see” only by virtue of it interacting with another object, like a tree bending. You only see the wind because something else is responding to it. So that is...

[audience]

in the family of marks.

Autumn

I wasn't even going that far, but now you're taking it there. So yes.

Ben

I was looking past Anthony's shoulder and there are marks on this wall, you know, and I don't know what made them, but they were made, the mark-making occurred. I think it's a way of opening back up that idea, so that we're not so concerned about who made the mark in what way, but we see that it happened, and that it can happen beyond human engagement—that there are marks in the world.

[audience]

Thank you. I think I have a better understanding.

Ben

And I think in Autumn's framing, the time and space of that mark is to be opened as well.

Anthony

Often language creates this illusory distinction between the permanent, the static and unchanging, and the transitory. But even things that seem unchanging are constantly interacting with aspects of the environments they occupy in actual physical ways, not just in some vague sort of conceptual way. This is something that was brought up earlier—everything in this space is responding to changes in humidity and temperature, for example.

Autumn, maybe you can talk a little bit about your interest in using the steam system, and how that relates to the site.

Autumn

Yeah, the steam system was a unique opportunity to think about these immaterial forces within an architecture, or a space that's considered “inside,” which is already this act of a kind of domestication. I was curious about opening up a space that already has so much drama to it, and so much story; how I might engage with it in a way that does not just piggyback off the drama. One of the ways that opened itself up to me was the idea that the steam system is a remnant or like a relic of the past of this place, as well as broader histories of industry and production. But more generally, it's also a system that all of us can understand and are familiar with in many other sites—it's not just this space that it's relevant to. The way that it showed up as an opportunity was when I saw it was possible to just cut it open. What I've learned is that the steam system operates as a closed loop, which creates is this sort of controlled, manipulated thing that we put to use. I was curious not only to see the material of the steam—which is physical, you can see it and feel it—but I see it as this system that's being opened. This thought has helped me move

away from the idea that a force needs to come from somewhere outside in nature—forces are more diverse than that. I don't know if that really answered your question—I'm sort of moving in a tangent along it.

Anthony

Would you say that it also has to do with a kind of ethos in your work of engaging with what's there? Again, this goes back to the question: what is the material?

Autumn

I think in this space, and in most of my work, I'm creating a situation in which those things can meet each other in one way or another and trying to be mindful about how much I'm involved in that and how much I'm not. It's the same kind of continuous approach, thinking through the material. The steam is just another kind of site that I can engage with.

Ben

The question of 'what is the material?' is the first thing I wrote down. After listening carefully to your response to Anthony's question—I'm not saying this as a judgement—but you refer to steam as both material and immaterial. And it made me wonder, how do we refer to it in the space? As a curator, I'm always thinking, 'what's the context?' How do you create a context within which someone identifies something or disidentifies something within a space. But is that shift from materiality to material as simple (or as profound) as that to which we call attention to or do not call attention to? When the steam is contained in the pipe it is immaterial to us, right? It's not; we just don't access it, although we hear it a little bit. But even with that, we mostly hear the clanging of metal.

Anthony

But we also experience it through heat, the increased temperature of the space.

Ben

But then when we see it, it's quite material in that it performs a type of mark-making on the floor, and it animates the paper, and becomes part of the atmosphere in the space. How do you locate that shift for you between materiality and material?

Autumn

I think this is where language is extremely important. The material I'm talking about, the word 'materials' shifts from being something you identify on a didactic wall text for an artwork, for example, or the kind of thing an artist would bring into the studio and traditionally understand as their material, to the nature of that thing. For that reason, it can be a little confusing for me too. But in this case, the steam, from the phenomenological as well as the temporal perspective I'm taking, is immaterial in my mind. It's only visible because the emerging steam has to respond to the temperature of the space, which is why it lifts, which is why it becomes white. The steam itself is not really something that I can control as a material; I can only respond to it. I think that also speaks to this idea that something can be both immaterial and material; the work then presents this paradox or duality where something both is and is not. My profound sense of that is coming from my feeling that there's not much in the world that exists without its response—although that might not always seem like the case because you don't always see or know what the response is. Maybe that proposition lends itself more to a context of spirituality, where there's a level of faith or knowledge that goes beyond what you can see through evidence, or that evidence may take a long time to reveal itself. So I think it's a continuous paradox; when I say material, it means both. And it's important to recognize both.

Ben

If you were listing the materials on the didactic, you would not put steam in that piece?

Autumn

No, I don't think I would. The idea that this piece can be presented somewhere else might require figuring out what internal system or force is there, and maybe it's not

steam. The didactic might say the material is based on the parameter that it requires, it could be 'steam' or, I don't know, 'gravity,' or something else that is present within an interior site. It would be left to whoever's working there to figure out how to fulfill that parameter or what to do with it.

Anthony

Yeah, it's like, how far out do you want to go to draw a line around the work, right? Because there's also the boiler. But then the boiler also encompasses the steam, water, and heat. In a very basic way, that's what the system does. It's transferring heat. Heat is applied to water at a single point, enough to turn it into steam, which then passes through metal. The metal gets hot, and it's the radiation of that heat from the metal that makes the space warm. There's something a little phantasmagoric about it, when you think about the physics involved. But how far would you need to back out to encompass that system? I always think is an interesting question with any kind of expanded field work.

Autumn

In that sense, I think the boiler and all of that, is really part of the building. To me, they're all continuous; they're all part of one entity that is creating the possibility for me to be able to do this.

Anthony

It creates a kind of access point for thinking about what the work is in a more complex way.

[audience]

I thoroughly enjoyed this. I think this work, which has been the focus of a lot of conversation right now, has so much animated quality; it feels very alive, at least in the simplest sense. I'm really interested to hear what your throughline is between this work and some of the freestanding works in the basement. I can draw that line myself; I think they too have a very animated quality to them. But I'm just wondering what your throughline between these are?

Autumn

We haven't really mentioned the pieces downstairs, but I think that if we can take them for an example, I'm really interested in the way that structurally there's a sort of disappearance that happens because of where it's installed. There's a level of projection that you need to engage as a viewer to imagine what the actual shapes really are, because you're given these clues at the base that are very graphic, and the way that you need to understand it pushes you to move around them to try to figure it out. I'm experiencing that the same way that you were experiencing that. Then there's the fixed reality that's revealed more clearly when you take it out of that space and you can see, oh, there's this sculptural drawing. I think letting the external environment intervene some way with the work is the through-line that I'm experiencing between this work and those pieces.

Anthony

Do you want to talk about that in relation to the arc piece as well?

Autumn

The arc piece is similar, except I think it's more related to positionality. It also requires movement—in myself and anybody who's looking at it—in order to have any sense of the fullness of it. It's not a one-to-one sort of experience and it will never be, because the nature of that reflective material means that you can only see the arc clearly from one perspective. You need to adjust yourself to seek it or search for it. I think that searching is the connection that I'm experiencing and reading from a lot of my works. But they're certainly not premeditated; I think it's a result of how I'm negotiating with things and making step-by-step choices.**Anthony**

I think that work is a good index of how you don't think of these things as objects. Because yes, there's a piece of metal that's coated with reflective material, but it's also really hard to think of the object itself as the work, because the experience of perceiving it is only something that happens when you move in relation to it.

[audience]

You were saying you didn't take steam as material in the work. Would you say the same for the light in the arc piece?

Autumn

Yes, the arc piece would still perform the same way if it was in a different space. If someone took a flash photo of it, it would be revealed. It doesn't need to be this particular light in order to see it. The flash is really for your service. I mean, I think the light is in service of the person approaching the thing and who wants to see it better or see it more clearly.

Anthony

If there's any light on it, there's going to be a point at which it will become more vivid based on the angle of incidence of whatever light is hitting.

Autumn

It's the same kind of pigment that you see mixed into parking lines or road signs. By default, the service of that material is to make something visible in different kinds of light. And the point of the light being here is in service to our viewership, but it's not really a part of the work, let's say.