

Jessica Stockholder

Peer out to See

The knowledge that we have invented our world does not erase the possibility that we might believe in it - Jessica Stockholder

Visual-verbal puns and rhymes abound in Jessica Stockholder's vibrant art. As things that once seemed familiar and ordinary take on new life, mirroring, echoing and dialoguing with each other in their unlikely new roles, they become imposing, assertive, cheeky, sly, teasing, alluring, whimsical and much more. Never, however, are they routinely pedestrian. Stockholder's world is composed more by association than by conventional forms of analysis. Her works propose that, if we want to examine something, we need to scrutinize, probe, and scan carefully in an intent reading that goes beyond mere glancing and glimpsing: by peering out in this fashion we might, of course, see more than we bargained for: we might end up walking the plank, suspended on a platform above the depths, launched into the unknown – on a pier out to sea.



Sketches for the installation *Peer out to See* in the Crystal Palace, 2010

Sliding seamlessly from the literal to the metaphorical, from the physical to the figurative, so that it weaves a tissue of disjunctive connectives, Stockholder's beguiling form of play has become a hallmark of a practice that now spans some three decades. Deeply serious yet light hearted, witty yet charged, her ludic touch seduces, solicits, coaxes, beckons, and entices its audiences, who frequently find themselves snared and then, on stage, without having been aware of their transition from passive

observers to active participants. Such a disarming approach allows her art to "slip[s] across the surface by the most improbable syntagmatic routes, dragging a nebulous cargo of dissembled meaning in its wake", as American critic Jack Bankowsky astutely notes.¹ To the artist, this method partakes of the realms of both conceptualizing and fabricating. "My work often arises in the world like an idea arises in your mind. You don't quite know where it came from or when it got put together. Nevertheless it's possible to take it apart and see that it has an internal logic," she wrote: "I'm trying to get closer to thinking processes as they exist before the idea is fully formed."² Unexpected couplings of the abstract (vivid colours and rich textures) and the identifiable (domestic and industrial materials) form the stuff from which both her autonomous sculptures and her site specific installations are made. Purposely purposeless, they all seem designed to facilitate, ease, aid, clarify or otherwise alleviate conditions that though they may not be precisely identifiable are self-evident: we embrace them as things that could belong to our everyday world, or that might seamlessly become part of our local environment.

Stockholder's signature touch is manifest in the larger communal situations she creates through the ways they draw us, as we navigate their carefully choreographed mise-en-scenes, into a shared purview. Passage through their by-ways proves invariably invigorating: intriguing as opposed to reassuring, tonic rather than soporific. This effect derives from the fact that the contexts from which, and for which, her in situ works have been created assume a novel guise, an unexpected dimension, as a consequence of her intervention: scale changes, proportions

1 Jack Bankowsky, "The Obligatory Bed Piece: Jessica Stockholder" *Artforum*, October 1990, p. 142.

2 Jessica Stockholder, "Interview with Klaus Ottman", *The Journal of Contemporary Art*, Spring/Summer 1991, p. 100.

contract, space elides, depth diminishes, sounds magnify, and light dissolves, bleaches, or bathes, whatever stirs within its compass. Fleeting shifts in our perception require that we reconfigure our preconceptions and presumptions – and so recalibrate what we thought we knew about this place. Testing the waters, so to speak, we may find we are not on solid ground as we supposed. Finding ourselves adrift instead of standing firm, we are constantly required to confront novel options and choices. Preferences and proclivities are called upon – and called into question. Integral if normally suppressed elements in a thought process, these intangibles now register themselves in the conscious mind, making themselves present for scrutiny along with the more tangible intangibles that impact the body – for air, light, and sound animate the pavilion, creating a vortex at whose dynamic centre we find ourselves.

Jessica Stockholder's aesthetic is based in the time-tested attributes of sculpture: solids inhabit space, volumes describe forms, material is subject to gravity, stillness conjures motion. Although manifestly part of a modernist sculptural legacy that stems from Picasso, Schwitters, Rauschenberg and others, her work nonetheless betrays a painter's sensibility: Matisse's is perhaps its closest affiliate. Subtle, resonant, idiosyncratic yet instantly identifiable, Stockholder's singular sense of colour is largely responsible for the undeniable sense of pleasure that radiates from her work, and that separates it from the work of the countless followers who have learnt much from her rigorous yet generous practice.

One of the most influential sculptors of her generation Stockholder, in recent years, has fashioned installations that allow visitors to utilize them to their own ends. As *Peer out to See* demonstrates, these temporary constructions become places for casual conversations between locals and visitors, for improvised games, and for dalliance - in short, they are places to hang out, and give oneself over to the flow and flux. Whether in Madison Square Park in Manhattan in 2009 (with *Flooded Chambers Maid*), or in the luminous Palacio de Cristal in Madrid's Buen Retiro Park, people drift and idle in similar ways as they make of their serendipitous encounters what they will. Deft explorations of the spatial, structural, social and cultural features of the given environment, Stockholder's most ambitious works leave room for the myriad needs of a shifting audience who may never know to what extent it has become an essential part of the play.

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The air inside the Crystal Palace is held stiller and quieter than the air outside, though it does remain fluid with air outside and with air and birds moving through the chinks between the panes of glass. This slowed down body of air filled with changing light as the earth rotates is at the center of the work *Peer out to See*. The slowed down pace of event inside provokes notice of the body's eventfulness, and questions about time hover.



Lead-up drawings
for the installation
Peer out to See in
the Crystal Palace,
2010

The Pier built into the Crystal Palace mirrors the structure that might be built out into the lake facing the Palace. This slippage in time/fantasy lodges itself in-between the particles of pigment, colored ash, light, and molecules of air and plastic. The resulting vibration surrounds the viewer on the pier held, together with the air, by the planes of glass in time slowed down. The star pond growing duckweed slowly unfolds in still communion with the other

planes of color, all seen against the gray expanse of the floor –flat and facing the heavens.

The whole energy of the Crystal Palace sweeps upwards. There is an invisible windless wind sweeping at the feet as it blows towards the sky. The colors of *Peer out to See* are weighted, and heavy on the ground, moving upwards to the paler combined whiteness of the full spectrum of light caught and bounced around by the panes of glass describing the arches of the ceiling.

The elements:

- A terracotta orange circle described with orange pigment lying loose on the floor.
- The description of the circle is completed with charring of the wood of the pier.
- Star shaped pond growing bright green duckweed.
- Column of random plastic parts wired together. Brightly colored at the bottom moving to pastel and transparent as it moves upward.
- Fans suspended moving air towards the entering spectator.



Sketches for the installation *Peer out to See* in the Crystal Palace, 2010

Biography

Jessica Stockholder was born in Seattle, WA, and lives and works in New Haven, Connecticut. She received a degree in painting from the University of British Columbia and a MFA from Yale University, where she is currently the Director of Graduate Studies in Sculpture.

Stockholder has exhibited widely in museums and galleries internationally since 1982. Her public project, *Flooded Chambers Maid*, was on display in Summer 2009 in Madison Square Park, New York. A mid career survey exhibition *Jessica Stockholder, Kissing the Wall: works, 1988-2003* was shown at the Blaffer Art Gallery, University of Houston, Texas and the Weatherspoon Art Galley, University of North Carolina, Greensboro. She has had solo shows at the Dia Center for the Arts (New York, 1995), the P.S.1 (New York, 2006) and K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Dusseldorf, 2002-2003). She was the 2007 recipient of the Smithsonian Institution's Lucelia Artist Award.

Bibliography

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Jessica Stockholder, Survey Exhibition, Kuntshallen Brandts
Klaedefabrik. Odense, Denmark, 2005 (exhibition catalogue)

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Peer out to See

14 July 2010 – 28 February 2011

Palacio de Cristal

Parque del Retiro

Images

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