

S P I N E  
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# SPINE

Cati Bestard  
Lisa Blas  
Sonia Louise Davis  
Shoshana Dentz  
Anne Eastman  
Jenny Monick  
Anne Vieux

Curated by  
Suzanne McClelland  
Leeza Meksin

Contributions by  
Mónica de la Torre  
Wayne Koestenbaum  
Jennifer Nelson

Ortega y Gasset Projects

Space Sisters Press

TORSION

curved  
sideways  
twice as  
in an S  
this  
condition  
of swaying  
left  
to right  
calcified  
obdurate  
requiring  
ortho-  
pedia  
an ortho-  
dox approach  
to remain up-  
right, materials:  
steel rods,  
wire, screws,  
bone grafts  
esses pluralize  
before  
and after  
a common-  
place  
un-  
happy  
up-  
bringings  
lead  
to art  
traded  
spine  
refusing  
to straighten  
for  
books  
with un-  
bending  
spines

— or the  
idea  
of them—  
being a teen  
restless  
another  
false friend  
spine is  
thorn  
in the source  
language  
not espina  
but lomo  
instead  
animal's back  
backbone  
oh bestiary  
amoral  
amor  
de mis amores  
where  
did your body go  
a thorn  
in the fold  
asociación  
libre  
el libro  
call me un-  
hinged  
I work hard  
to keep  
everything  
together  
often left  
justified  
to be  
bound  
so the done  
be reframed by  
the doing un-  
doing itself  
and back

[my prostate a shopping mall]

goodnight, new  
year—I meant to  
begin in Barbra’s voice  
but I’m speaking in my  
own voice as Ralph Fiennes

wandering toward de-  
sanctified Paris rest-  
aurants, she fell  
down, a declaration  
signaling my  
immorality

when *Oliver!*  
(movie) came out I  
envied Richard  
Lester, boy star

singing  
“Consider Yourself” off-  
pitch at audition, I  
didn’t get cast, even  
as a chorine

couldn’t  
naturally project my  
voice in Montgomery

Theater, downtown San  
Jose, near fabled  
smoke shop

longing to stop at  
smoke shop to study  
smut

discussed the allure  
of cadmium orange  
at dim sum this  
morning, also men-  
tioned capum mortem

remember M.’s  
low-pitched speaking  
voice and his Moses  
hand on mine—could  
I have pushed that friend-  
ship more resolutely  
in gay direction?

why  
did I equate  
words and genital  
sensation?

I remain  
uncertain about the  
function of suppositories

made a spontaneous  
mark with a leftover tube  
of auratic cadmium orange,  
smeared it with my  
finger to make abrupt  
punctuating lines—

decided  
to squeeze Mars violet  
and Persian rose into  
crevices where ultramarine  
remains exposed  
around the embroidered  
green-stained buff  
titanium

today I’m a puce  
or carmine Barbra

Saint-Saëns concerto  
signifying Agamemnon  
fed my wish to  
triangulate with pale  
closeted pianist, my hand-  
picked Count  
Almaviva and my  
private Moses, in-  
eligible for the Mount

as a woman  
Moses apologized for  
his girth



the backs of his arms  
not my property

---

young  
fops reading Edna  
Ferber's *Show Boat*  
or *Giant* don't want  
to flash their  
organs to older  
tourist guys

---

small  
and smooth, my  
prostate mistaken for  
a shopping mall

---

dreamt that Liz and Dick  
in a theater's back row  
watched a movie—  
in profile Liz was  
not beautiful—but  
when onscreen  
a character started  
deriding Liz, I felt  
vicarious chagrin

---

why did Dick seem  
the loser in this daisy-  
pied arrangement?

---

her discovery  
of my cock began  
to equal my own

apprehension of its  
rumored existence

---

this tiny notebook  
confirms confinement—  
reclaim German  
citizenship

---

see his  
duck hands misuse  
the sacral li-  
bidinal hour

---

develop crush based  
on his theft—smittiness  
founded on Robin  
Hood strategy of  
stealing back my  
rightful property

---

several dead poets  
chorally eviscerate my tie  
to pansy riot

---

efface  
ocean and choose field—  
encode flow *within* field

---

mother  
ate tuna and read

*War and Peace* at  
Stickney's, a circum-  
stance I idolized

---

when diplomat  
at Jackie Onassis's book  
party—Asia Society—  
mistook me for chicken

---

is it ethically  
fraudulent to  
teach prison literature?

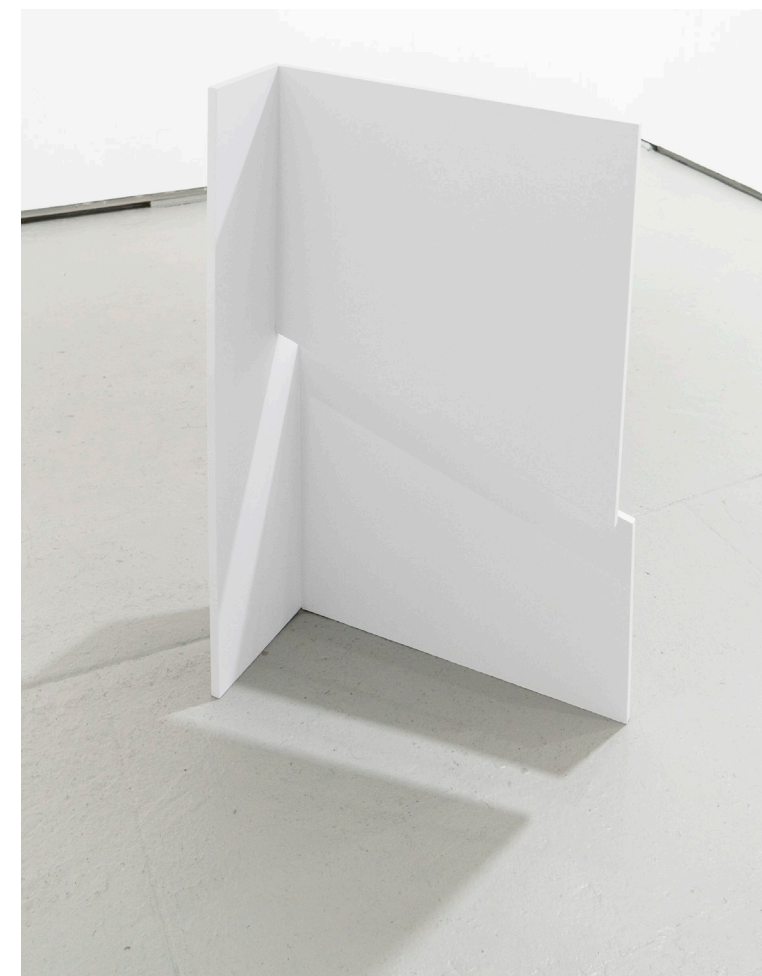
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inviting you to  
ignite my ignorance

---

what is  
third person plural  
pronoun (they) in  
Italian? why can't  
I remember he or  
she or it or they?  
do Italian speakers  
leave he or she  
or it or they  
unspoken and unspecified?

**SPINE**  
Cati Bestard  
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Cati Bestard



(left) *That corner in the living room*, 2017, Inkjet Print, Edition of 3, 34 x 43 in.  
(above) *Corner #1*, 2017, Wood, 13 x 29 x 48 in. Photos by Larson Harley.



Lisa Blas



Enter Stage Left (Monday's image, v. 1), 2018, Broadsheet, Edition of 500, 30 x 22 3/4 in., (folded 15 x 11 in.)  
Distributed by Space Sisters Press, Beacon, NY. Photos by Frank Oudeman.



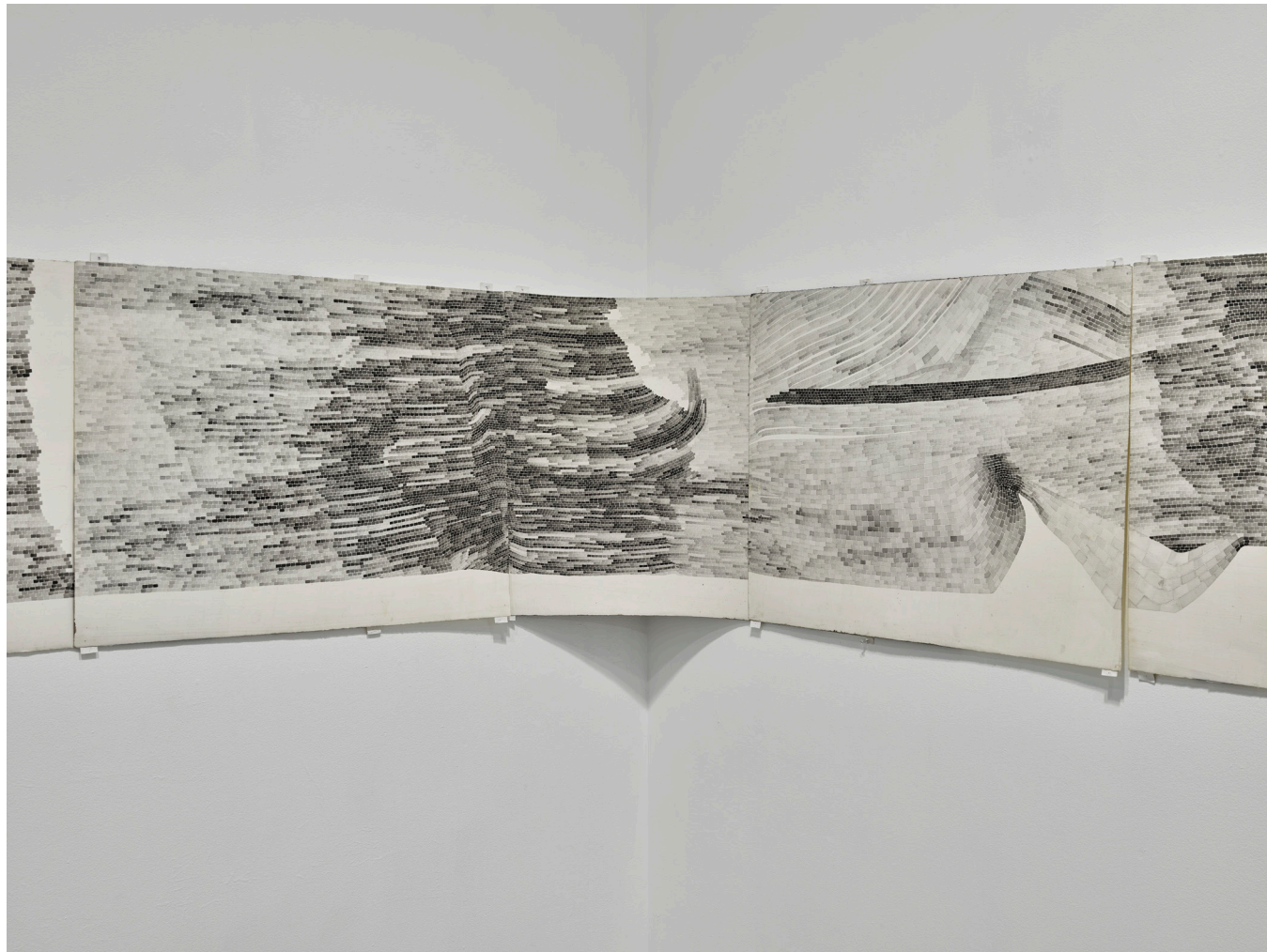
Sonia Louise Davis



*August Studio Movement Score*, 2017, 9-channel video, silent, 04:45. Improvised response to graphic notation on fabric pinned variously to walls, in street clothes, felt 5 minutes max, accumulate as many as possible. Photos by Frank Oudeman.



Shoshana Dentz



*A Year(s) of Untitled, 2008 – present, Gouache, watercolor, and wax paper on paper, Currently 22 x 450 in.  
Photos by Frank Oudeman.*

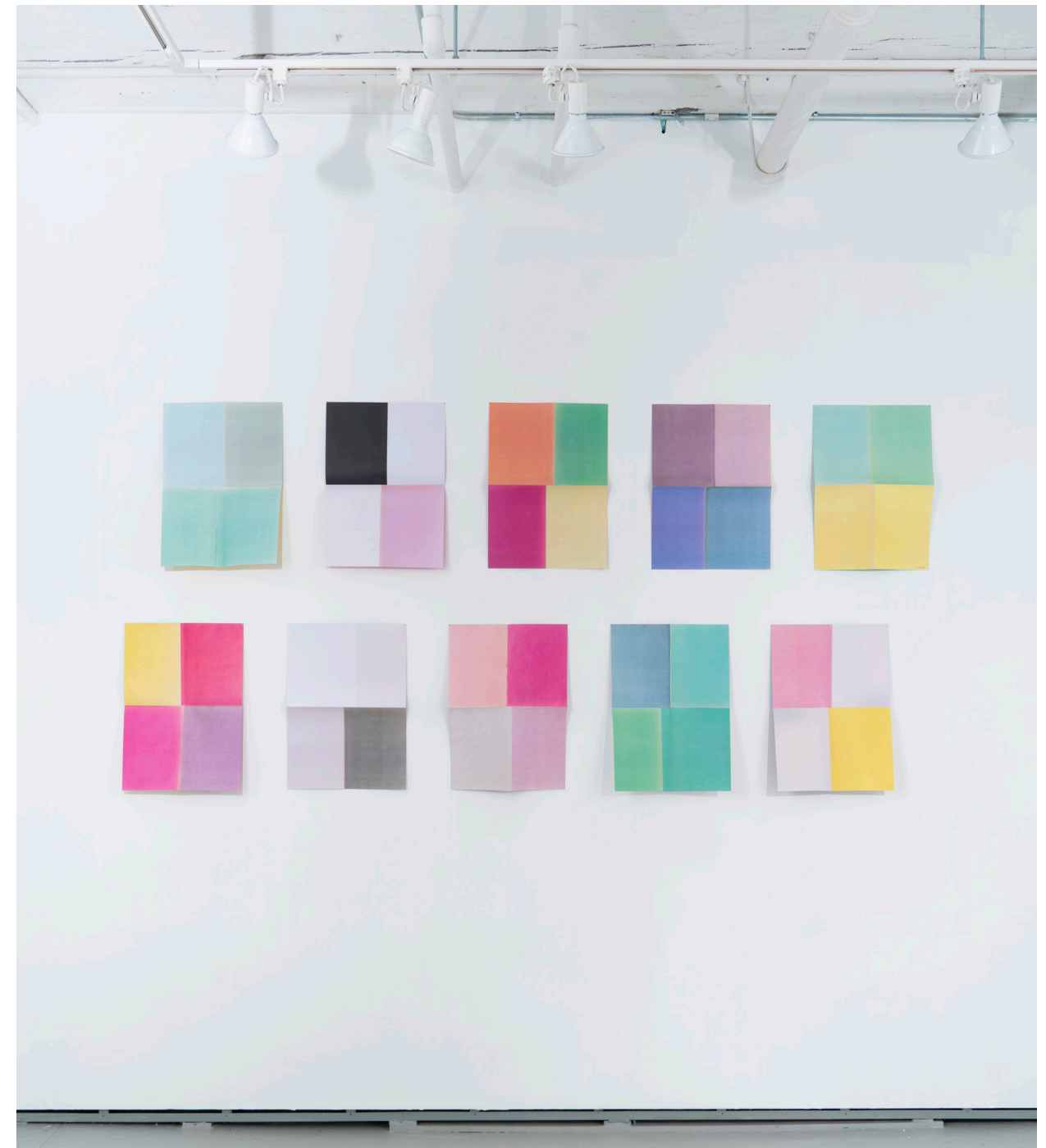




complicity and indifference, 2018, Wood, glass, mirror, newspaper, acrylic, 9 x 13 x 4 in. Photos by Frank Oudeman.



Jenny Monick



*5 Posters*, 2018, 5 doubled-sided offset prints, 15 ¼ x 21 ½ in. each, Edition of 250, Published by Space Sisters Press, Beacon, NY. Photos by Frank Oudeman and Larson Harley.

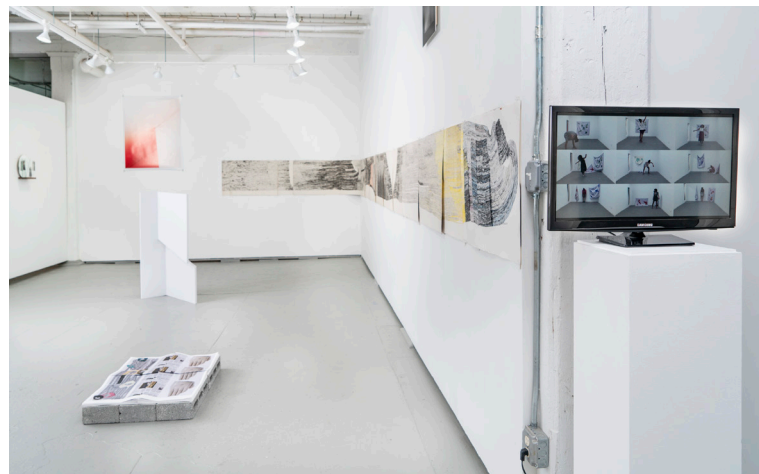
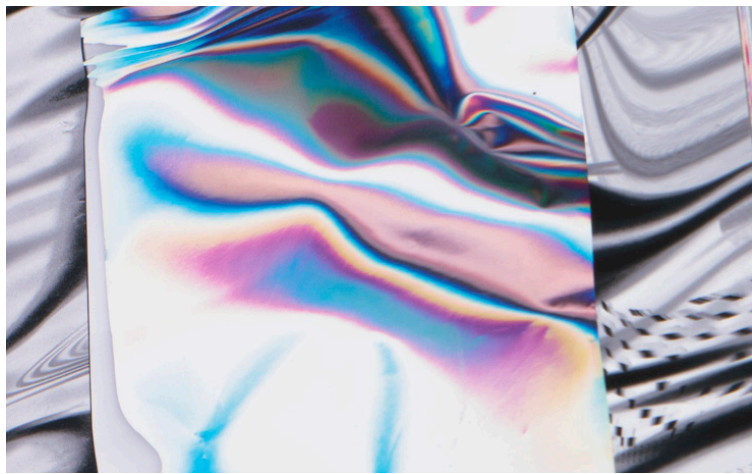


Anne Vieux



*Transitory Flatspace*, German case bound in lenticular fabric, full color archival pigment prints with holographic foil blocking and 8 translucent leaves, Edition of 15 + 2APs, 9 x 12 in., 60 pages, + facsimile of original that can be handled without gloves. Published by Small Editions Press. Photos by Frank Oudeman.





Art as Spinal Surgery, and  
Queer Formalism

Spine is a biometaphor for all structure. A spine seems neutral: what matters is what a spine supports; a spine itself has no meaning.

Of course, the spine is not actually neutral. All vertebrates experience a spine's constraint on their symmetry. A creature with a spine must be symmetrical along an axis along which the creature directs itself. Symmetry is in some ways beside the point. The point is: a spine orients a body at right angles to a face, and gives the face its direction. It turns out that a spine is not just a biometaphor for structure; it is, more specifically, the biometaphor for structural orientation.

A spine orients a creature toward control and agency, toward the horizon of possible approaches to the world. In a book, a spine similarly orients surfaces to potential use. When a book is in use, the spine is the absence of interface; when making interface possible, and in order to make interface possible, a spine must at least temporarily disappear from view. The creature's spine directs the approach to the world, and the book's spine directs the interface to the reader. In neither case is a spine permitted immediate contact: not with the world, not with the reader. Through its withholding of contact, the spine makes contact possible and directs it. A sense of direction is the part of

meaning that opens meaning to some possible futures and forecloses others. The orientation of meaning is meaning's temporal dimension, more than a spatial one. It is the part of meaning that intersects with everything else in cultural practice in order to co-produce a habitus, the set of lived behaviors that select for certain (future) worlds and foreclose others. If the world is a stage, orientation is the director.

So if a spine is the thing not meant to be seen, the hidden director of the scene, then what happens when it is made visible? In books and creatures, the spine seems to advertise and summarize the general orientation of a thing. But it is important not to confuse a spine with a binding nor with posture. A spine remains invisible until the creature or book falls apart.

One way of defining art is to call it the attempt to make a spine visible without killing its creature or breaking its book. Sometimes this is as straightforward as a dancing skeleton; usually it is not. Art's special magic is that preserves a spine's existence as spine while revealing it and its non-neutral work of orientation.

Art condenses a kind of formalist phenomenology of life: it exercises the lived experience of form-as-orientation. Often art accomplishes its miraculous surgery—extraction of a living spine—by estranging experience from *everyday* lived experience, from commonplace expectations. This need not be the effect of a single

miraculous "aesthetic moment," but can arise more sustainably from extended lived practice, from a continuous intervention in one's own habits. It can be grounded in material manipulations that complicate the interface, unsmooth it, render it labile. And it can be iterative and layered, a collage that reinforces form by self-dismemberment and reconstitution, deviling its own metaphorical yolk.

The preceding discussion has been an homage to Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (and a very little bit to Gilles Deleuze's "fold"). This is because I have often thought that her understanding of "orientation"—a deneutralization of Erwin Panofsky's "habitus," admitting that habits have direction—points the way toward an ethical structuralism. At the end of her book, she implicitly exhorts readers, through a careful use of first-person-plural pronouns, to take part in an orientation not toward deviation, but toward queerness itself, toward the possibility of deviation, toward turning away from normative expectation. (Ahmed uses the word "queer" literally as well as more broadly, placing resistance to compulsory heterosexuality at the core of the possibility of non-normative practice and life.) This is not to pretend that there are no spines, but to be oriented to and affirm the possibility of spines that do not spine the way we might expect them to.

When I wrote parts of this essay, standing on a train platform, the lights of other phones flashed beside

me in syncopation with the flashing of my phone's face as I typed. What if this merely formal observation could truly reflect Ahmed's idea of queerness in solidarity across difference? Or when the grindings of many sidewalks in many places twinkled on the belly of a skateboard I almost tripped over, writing this essay, could I simultaneously be open to all the possible ways that skateboard might have lived? One can sense the transreal, the existence of multiple realities connected across dissonant conditions (to modify Micha Cárdenas's term); but how to respect the minutiae of lived orientation across these broad feelings of connection?

Much as I, as an art historian, love my great flawed predecessors of the twentieth century, ethical structuralism has seemed to me elusive. Even the best structural insights are often compromised by essentialism. It is too easy to reduce even righteous arguments about structural patterns to conclusions like "While white people are rich, brown people are rich in spirit," or "Women are objects." Such modes of analysis then in turn are too easily borrowed and flipped by conservative and reactionary groups seeking to maintain power; or perhaps the flipped forms were the point of structuralism to begin with. To attend to structures while nevertheless being especially attuned to the ways life is lived at their very edge, at the brink where old structure passes into new, or even occasionally into *unstructure*—this is the only antidote.

This is the promise of Ahmed's call to orient ourselves to queerness.

Because queerness departs from standard forms, formalism might seem like its enemy. Formalism has, like a spine, seemed neutral, offered a potential for universal language, formed the basis of the alignment of abstract art and internationalism at the dawn of the twentieth century, with its clusters of anarcho-socialist world-makers, and so on, in vain. At its worst, by the twenty-first century, works that seemingly privilege form and advertise universal appeal through refusal of politics in fact privilege and advertise patriarchal heterocompulsive white supremacy.

But here the only way out is through. By fucking with the expectations of form-first art, by displaying works that not merely re-spin but re-spine iconography, material, format, iterative praxis, etc., etc., etc. in such a way that form comes forward maximally, one can begin to enact a queer formalism, a playground for queer phenomenology. In this playground, form is the generative boundary of what it contains. Art's role as spinal surgery becomes not just descriptive, but prescriptive, oriented ethically toward future bodies, real and transreal.



In the Fall of 2018 Ortega y Gasset Projects presented a group exhibition that we curated together. In the process that shaped the exhibition, our discussions explored the mental and physical structures of a book and questioned what is legible, optical, material, emotional, or cerebral. Reading is viewing and occurs any time anyone encounters visual art but it also happens when we're handling and engaging with books as objects. Text, form, and color live in the realm of the physical and the private with a spine functioning as an interruption, an intersection, a fulcrum, and a central structure, often simultaneously. The works presented in the exhibition question when the private act of reading becomes public and what is shared.

*SPINE* brought together a wide range of media, including drawing, photography, sculpture, video, multiples, and artist books, and we're thrilled that the accompanying book also

includes poetry by Wayne Koestenbaum and Mónica de la Torre, as well as a poetic essay by Jennifer Nelson.

We would like to thank all the artists for contributing their work and thoughts to the book: Cati Bestard, Lisa Blas, Sonia Louise Davis, Mónica de la Torre, Shoshana Dentz, Anne Eastman, Wayne Koestenbaum, Jenny Monick, Jennifer Nelson, and Anne Vieux.

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Suzanne & Leeza

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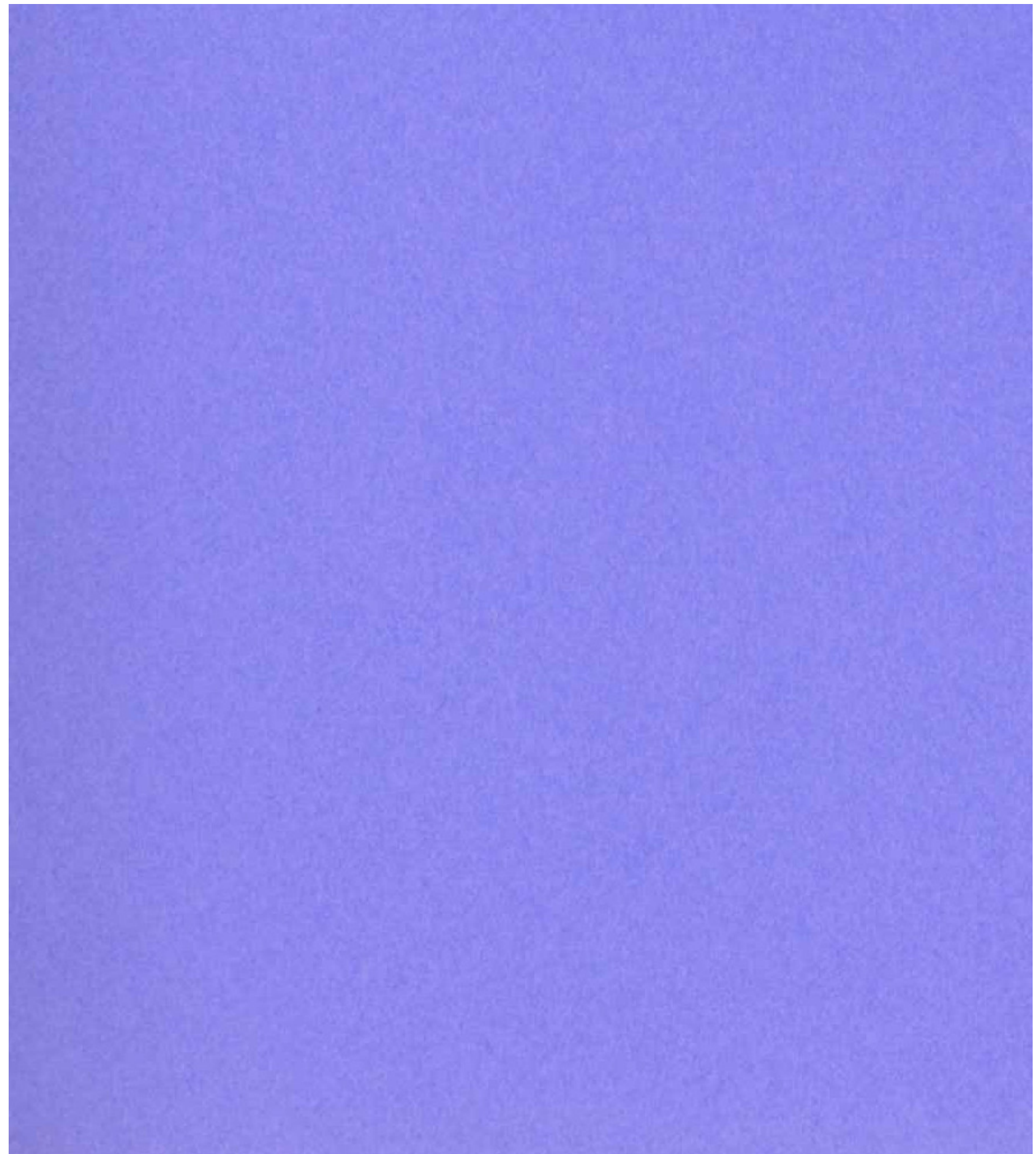
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