

Kelly Jazvac: I've followed your work now for ten years or so and seen installations in many different cities. Your work has been influential for my own practice, so I am most pleased to ask you some specific questions about it.

My first question is about ephemerality. The provisional and the non-fixed (in respect to how you use material and how you employ abstraction) are recurring themes in your work. Is that a political position at all? For example, in Eungie Joo's essay for the last New Museum triennial, temporary and provisional artworks and practices are discussed as a possible response to current economic and political instability. I didn't take that to mean in an illustrative way *per se*, but rather that these are the conditions that have led artists to produce this kind of work.

Polly Apfelbaum: Political and practical; it's always hard to separate the two. I moved to NYC in 1978. That's a year after the summer of Sam: it was a different city. So you had to be aware of practical circumstances. It was a matter of getting your work to fit your life so that it makes sense, but also so it could exist between everything else going on around you. It's also personal. I am a do it yourselfer. I had to be, but it also matches my general being in the world as an artist. I loved being in NYC but it took awhile to put art and life together. In 1984, I lived in Madrid and when I came back to NY, the East Village gallery scene was taking off and I had my first one person show in 1986. I was very influenced by Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*; his memos really struck a chord. Lightness, quickness: all things I wanted in my work. I was not interested in making monuments—I loved the idea of fluidity of thought and process. I also wanted the juicy stuff too—color and form. I loved painting, but I was very interested in things I did not know about and was seeing around me in the city. Installation was in the air and I was trying everything out for size. I had studied painting and printmaking but when I got to NYC there was so much more to experience, I couldn't help but be influenced by all I saw.

KJ: A remarkable book, and how uncannily current it feels (thanks to the extended time and space of e-mail interviews, I've now read it and can respond in a slightly more informed way.) Calvino's memos include "Lightness;" "quickness;" "exactitude;" "visibility;" and "multiplicity." I think lightness

could parallel what I think of in my own work as the right amount of play in the face of “work,” “art” and politics, and my own intensity about what I do. However, Calvino’s terms expand this further for me. Lightness is still linked to heaviness; however, when light, things avoid turning to stone and becoming fixed and rigid. Lightness is light on its feet. This includes both a physical ability to change directions easily and fluidly, *as well as* light-mindedness. I also like how he uses Lucretius to illustrate this, and to what end it might serve: “The *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius is the first great work of poetry in which knowledge of the world tends to dissolve the solidity of the world, leading to a perception of all that is infinitely minute, light, and mobile... Lucretius’ chief concern is to prevent the weight of matter from crushing us.”² Speaking of turning to stone, have you ever done a permanent work?

PA: Not really. To be honest it doesn’t interest me that much. I like the ephemerality of what I do. I painted flowers on a wall for the biennial in Valencia, maybe they are still there. It was the time of the invasion of Kuwait, so I thought flowers would be appropriate. There was a lot of anti-American graffiti at the time. Bush days. The piece is called *For Alice*, an homage to the Wim Wenders film *Alice in the Cities*. The local kids drew graffiti with skulls over the flowers, which I thought was very fitting. I hope it’s still there and that there is more graffiti.

KJ: Leave it to kids to cut to the chase... it reminds me of an essay I'm reading right now by David Harvey that argues that one of the more ignored human rights is the freedom to "make and remake" the cities we live in.³ This story seems to illustrate the possibilities of that potential freedom playing out: public homage followed by public revision played out in real time. The story also makes me want to ask you about flowers. Could you talk about your interest in using them as a motif?

PA: Calvino came up in an interview I did with Claudia Gould in 2003 for my survey show catalog at ICA: "What he said about Folk Art has always stuck with me, that folk art, authentic folk art, is never sentimental or sweet. Rather it's very tough and sometimes a little ugly...he says: "if during a certain period of my career as a writer I was attracted to folk tales and fairy tales, this was not the result of loyalty to an ethnic tradition...not the result of nostalgia for things I read as a child, it was rather because of my interest in style and structure, in the economy, rhythm and hard logic with which they are told." So, I am attracted to that notion of a hard logic that is found in an unexpected place. In a world where everything is supposed to be simple and beautiful, things often turn out to be more complicated."

I think this is where the flowers come in; even though I consider my work abstract, there is always some reference outside, a connection to place, to memory or to popular

culture. And flowers—like Calvino’s reading of folk art—are often associated with sweetness and sentimentality, but that doesn’t always have to be the case...

The first flower pieces were fabricated wood flowers based on Warhol’s dingbats, and then later I did the wallflowers, which were 600 Mexican crepe-paper flowers pinned to the wall following a target pattern. I was thinking of a rose window, of Gertrude Stein and “A Rose is a rose is a rose.” I had been working on the floor, so I wanted to use the wall directly as a support, like the floor, turning the wallflower into a positive structure. Finally, also around this time, in the late 80’s, I made a small metal outdoor cut-out piece also using Warhol’s flowers dingbats, called *A pocketful of Posey*. A charm bracelet for Madonna. The flower motif sat for a while, and then in 2003 I got interested again. It was really drawing and the political situation which brought me back to the idea, graffiti, doodles, the ubiquity of flowers, looking back at “Flower Power.” *What’s love got to do with it* at Mass College of Art was the first show of the floor flowers, and it started with using the 20” x 20” Polaroid camera to photograph the fabric cut-outs, which kind of distanced them from their physicality at the same time as it revealed a new physicality. The flower piece there was called *Cartoon Garden*, and I was thinking about the collision of nature and culture.

One of the later pieces, *Pink Crush* was just in a show at the Metropolitan Museum called *Regarding Warhol*, which was a

show about his influence (it's now at the Warhol Museum). Warhol is of course a great model for taking the banal and the sweet and giving it an edge. For a biennial in Poland I made a set of flower flags, called *Flags of Revolt and Defiance*, bringing a more political angle to the flowers. One was a "Buck Fush" flower flag. That's one of the things I like about flowers, to work against people's expectations that they are just about pretty. So what I think all of this says is that the flowers—which everyone thinks of as simple and sweet—can suggest a lot more. I may be done with flowers or I may come back to them, I never know in advance.

KJ: My next question has to do with installation and viewing angles: unlike a painting, one can't get far enough back from your work to take in the image un-skewed by foreshortening.

Even when I've seen your works from a raised perspective (for example on a higher floor of a gallery, looking down below) there is still a perimeter that determines how one's body can approach the work. This trumped access is something I find really intriguing, especially when coupled with the seductive material and aesthetic qualities of the work. In some ways, a work like *Bones* (2000) results in a similar effect (being pulled in but blocked out at the same time). Could you talk about this viewing scenario and how you see it operating? And, a simple question, how do you look at your work when you're in the process of making it?

PA: You are right, the viewing angles are very important to get a sense of the specific physicality of the work. It needs to be experienced; you are in the piece as much as you are looking at it. I was just reading an essay on the film *Days of Heaven* and loved the quote: “there is an emotional distancing but an uncanny physical presence” in the film. I think that is what I am looking for: an uncanny physical experience. And I think that the fact that you can’t see everything may be the emotional distancing. I think of the work as situational, but also it depends on which body of work we are talking about. In some of the most recent installation work, (*Off Color; Not in Any Way Shape or Form*) the pieces are room size, but also porous so you can walk right through the work; that means the viewer really is in the middle of work. I like the fact that you never “get” everything, things are just out of range, excessive, and that you have to move around the work to activate it. It keeps you a bit off balance. This is one of the reasons I love the floor: it’s the “flat bed picture plane.” It’s a field. In some of the older large scale installations you could look down from above, if there was a higher level, but that’s not necessarily the preferred view. Most of the time I do have a favorite viewing position; it usually happens naturally while I am setting up the work and changes too as I spend more time with a work. That’s the other thing about working at this scale, it reworks the architecture of the space and the way people move. In an early piece, *Ice*, the first time it was shown it was squeezed into a gallery. One viewer said I made everyone feel like a wallflower.

In *Bones*, I was interested in teasing the viewer or working their imagination to question what was inside, the parts you can't see. Plus I love the simple object of a bolt of fabric. For me they are very sexy objects. Also, I liked the fact that they were sort of dumb objects, everyday objects. The viewing angle was not necessarily primary— lining them up was a response to the nature of the object, it just seems natural that they would line up that way, an ordinary object in an ordinary arrangement.

When I am making a piece, let's say the older hand-dyed work, I am usually thinking about the process and the systems as I am working, and the initial choice of material has a lot to do with the end result. In that sense, it goes from part to whole and doesn't have a predetermined form or shape. I do like to work intuitively in response to the space. Especially in the newer installation work, it is all improvisational. The installation decisions are mostly all made on site. In the old days, I sketched things out, and I still use a model occasionally. But I don't like to over-think the pieces in that sense. I never had a huge studio where I could install and see things completed; I prefer letting chance and circumstance into the work. In Rome I have a big, beautiful light-filled studio, I didn't start out working on installation but I am happy to say I am back there again. The space here suggested it and I have the time.

KJ: I like to think that the dumbness of the objects I make is kind of important. Not because I think the work or ideas are dumb, but because there is a dumbness to the ethos of the materials I'm pulling from to make my work and how one's body can interact with them, as well as actually see them.

I have two further responses, both pulled from *Six Memos*. First, Calvino on dumbness (kind of): "Samuel Beckett has obtained the most extraordinary results by reducing visual and linguistic elements to a minimum, as if in a world after the end of the world."⁴ Secondly, Calvino on viewing angles: "Perseus succeeds in mastering [Medusa's] horrendous face by keeping it hidden, just as in the first place he vanquished it by viewing it in a mirror. Perseus's strength always lies in a refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden."⁵

PA: I am glad you read and liked Calvino; he lived in Rome off and on during his life, so maybe he is newly relevant to me now. These are nice passages. Calvino is like that, you are thinking of something and then realize he has already been there. Of course I am attracted to Beckett's ability to reduce down without losing complexity, and I agree, it's a good kind of dumbness; also dumb in the sense of "mute"—not appealing to language but to nonverbal communication. Of course Beckett uses language, but he almost uses it as something

physical, as material. And indirectness is something that also figures in my work.

KJ: Moving along, the press release for *Flatland: Color Revolt* (2012) states, “each is a delicate but fixed object, created in Apfelbaum's studio, and then transported to the gallery via truck.” I thought that was an interesting twist, given this work in particular looks so explicitly non-fixed (I may have accidentally inhaled some of it while looking closely). Could you talk a bit about this? An absurdly tenuous mental image is conjured by this description of the work's transportation.

PA: Well, it was an adventure to say the least, and the press release is wrong, they are not fixed at all. This is the extreme case of ephemeral. They were carried one at a time down two flights of stairs to a waiting truck. Special boxes were made by a dear friend. We scheduled the delivery for early Sunday morning when the streets were empty and plotted the route with the fewest potholes. It was like a military operation. Then when we were returning the works, driving very slowly down the west side highway in a closed white van, we were stopped by the FBI. They thought we had a bomb in the truck...

This is work that I made and never thought it would be shown. I invited a lot of people to the studio to see it just in case it didn't. Gretel of Hansel and Gretel was an intern of mine, and

they wanted to do a show of the *Feelies*. Gretel had worked on the book I made, so when she moved to NYC and opened her gallery she asked me to have a show of them. I said yes, but nearing the time of the show the *Color Revolts* happened; they were in a way the logical extension of the immediacy of the *Feelies*. I remember Hansel and Gretel's first response; they loved them but were shocked. Nobody had any idea how we were going to pull this one off. We did and not one got messed up in transport. During the show there were a few mishaps but that goes with the territory; I think if you make work like this you can't get too precious about it. I think having work on the floor might have prepared me for what can happen when you use unconventional materials.

The *Feelies* and the *Color Revolts* came after I had stopped dying fabric and taken out my hand from the installation process. They were very intuitive and spontaneous; the work just happened. My hand and process is back in that work.

KJ: A slow moving van filled with piles of unmarked powder: that must have been an interesting conversation with the FBI. And the risk involved: a hefty pothole could have easily taken out the entire show!

Have you seen the film *Playtime* by Jacques Tati? My favourite scene takes place in a modernist nightclub constructed with all of the latest, but failing, building materials. The restaurant owners are holding their breath the

whole night in hopes that the room doesn't entirely fall apart before the guests leave (which it epically and comically does). The film seemed more about technological and material failure than your exhibition was, of course, but man the nightclub was beautiful! That, coupled with its super tenuous construction, made watching its inevitable destruction so affective, yet so funny.

PA: I don't know the film, but I am going to watch it. What resonates is the idea that everything around us is so fragile. It's the modern condition. Tati understood this very well; everything is temporary, lightweight and provisional. This can be scary, a loss of foundations and anchoring, or it can be liberating—I think this is what Calvino says about lightness. So you can resist, go back to heavy permanent materials, a kind of macho minimalism, or you can go with the lightness and provisionality—which is more interesting to me. The *Color Revolts* really took that idea to the extreme. Not the conceptual art answer, which is to turn away from physicality and objects, but to make objects that are almost impossibly fragile; can only be temporarily stable, and may collapse and fail at any time.

KJ: On to my next question: A Toronto collector of mid-century American abstraction, David Mirvish, tells a story of Helen Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell returning from Europe with rolls of Frankenthaler's new paintings. Motherwell, when speaking with a customs agent, whispers to

him that his wife thinks she's a painter, and if he could humor her, Motherwell would really appreciate it, as it is their honeymoon. The agent complies, and no customs fees are paid (nor is the value of the work revealed).

There is something about your work that evokes this story for me; obviously because of a historical connection between your techniques and Frankenthaler's, but, more strongly, because it is a story of mischief through a kind of pseudo-complicity (assuming they were both in cahoots in this event, trying to smuggle artwork through customs). It's an example of how to exploit a system by enacting certain familiar gestures/categories (say, of the "feminine" or "painting," for example), yet only to do so to gain access to something larger. Do you see part of what you're doing as mischievous (although you kind of answered that question already with your FBI story)? Like the Trojan horse, do more expansive possibilities open up when working from the inside out, rather than the outside in?

PA: What a wonderful story. I had an early found object piece that I brought into the country as "used sporting goods." I have transported more art as non-art, so as to avoid the "art question" all together. I think that sense of irreverence is really important and has been in the work from the start. For example, *Peggy Lee and the Dalmations*, *The Dwarfs without Snow White*, and the early fabric pieces that were just tossed on the floor like dirty laundry. I also know that I am a

contrary person. It's about not taking yourself too seriously; which is maybe the most serious thing you can do, and then leaving yourself open to play and an in-between space. I love the idea of mischief; for me the most interesting work always flirts with the edge of being "not art." The *Feelies* came right after I had seen the show of Eva Hesse's *Studio Works* organized by Briony Fer. There is a wonderful list from Sol Lewit, after she died, going through all the things left in the studio trying to figure out what was a piece and what was not...was she serious or just fooling around? I loved that. The *Feelies* started in the world as just fooling around, the *Color Revolts* were, can I really do this? Just glitter and plasticine. If you can't surprise yourself, if you are not discovering something new in doing this work, why do it? That is the essence of making art to me. I always hoped that the work operated on all these levels: the high and the low. Libby Lumpkin said I had one foot in the conceptual world and the other in the world itself—maybe that is my Trojan horse.

KJ: If you're willing, could you conclude the interview by responding to the following with an image instead of words?

- a) Your interest in Antonioni films
- b) Getting your "fuck you" back
- c) A system you can't figure out

PA: Sure. Stills from three of Antonioni's films:

- a) *Blowup*
- b) *Eclipse*
- c) *Red Desert*





¹ Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos for the New Millennium*. Cambridge:Harvard University Press. The sixth memo was not recorded in written form prior to Calvino's death. Curiously, the sixth memo was intended to be "consistency."

² Calvino, Pg 15

³ David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53. September-October 2008

⁴ Calvino, p. 95

⁵ Calvino, p. 5

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