

Agency
without

intention

intention

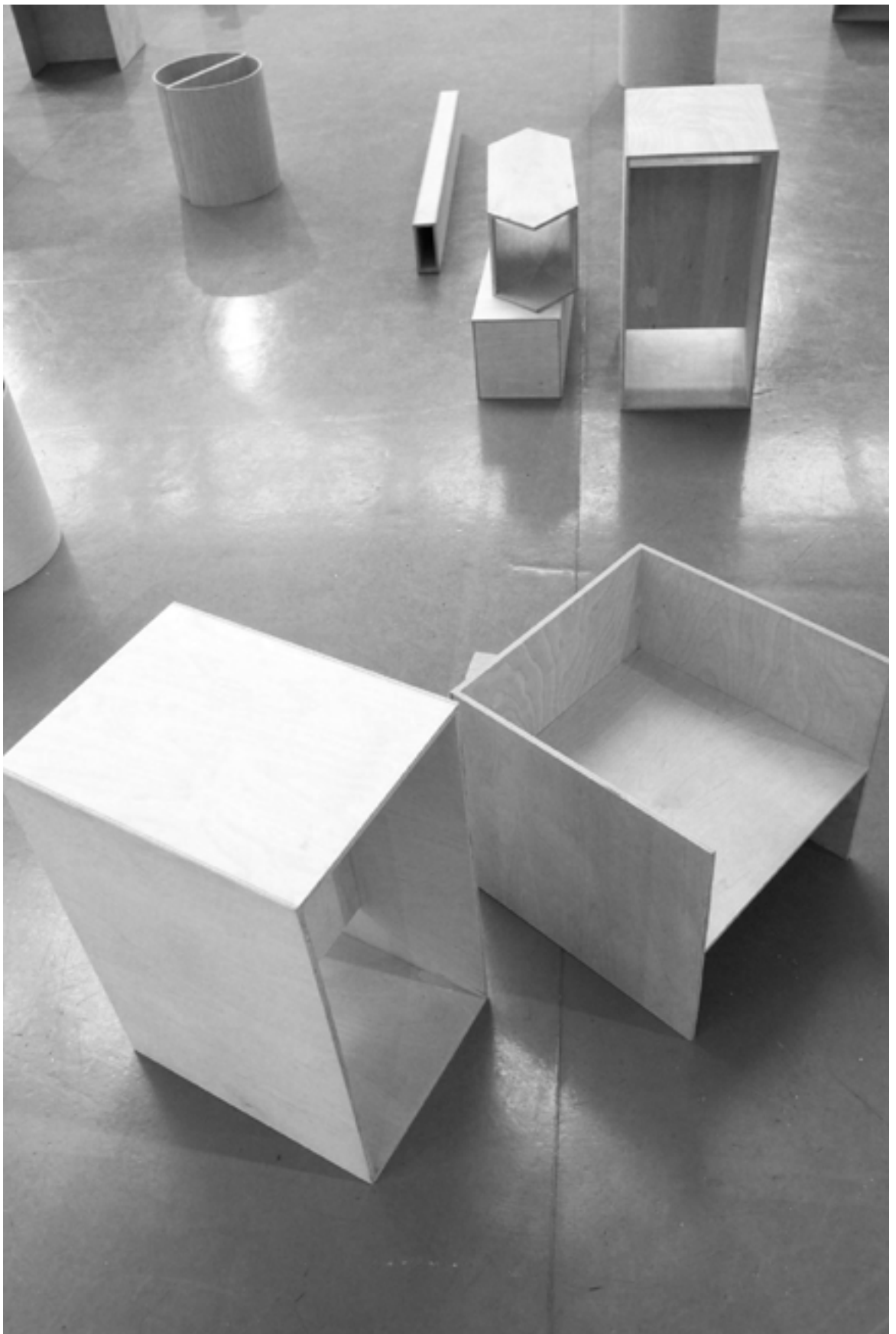
Agency

without

Herbert Read Gallery

University for the Creative Arts
Canterbury, UK

Inspired by the actions and interactions between the purposeful individual, the 'smart' object, and the social body.



Intentionality is bound up with individualism

— Mieke Bal.

One can have a goal but be in no condition to achieve it. Yet, can one gain agency yet avoid intentionality? Through four different projects this exhibition explores the apparent contingent relation between actions and purposes in four arenas: the technological, the aesthetic, the political, and the social.

Abdulbari Kutbi's *Pirouette Robots* roam around the Herbert Read Gallery, changing their direction of progress when finding obstacles. Although able to take simple decisions thanks to a system of interconnected nodes, as with more complex examples of Artificial Intelligence, the question of the machine's own will remain for now an attractive possibility.

Amongst the robots, Abigail Hunt and Kieren Reed's artwork *Liminal* occupies the gallery space. Made up of several dozens of simple geometric sculptures, it is a piece to be experienced through action. Visitors are invited to activate the work with the hope that their participation will provoke moments of unsolicited disorientation, exchange, and discussion.

Recent political efforts such as the international Occupy movements, or the Spanish 'Los Indignados', have been criticised for their lack of concrete objectives. Now that the outcomes of those movements are becoming viable political options with clear intentions, it is worth considering how to gain agency while avoiding the instrumentalization of one's actions. Rosana Antolí's video and performance *Disobedient Silences* recognises the risks of aligning actions and purposes by transforming the gallery into a space of protest for bodies and objects.

Agency is always relational; it depends on our position within a group or in a situation. On 15th September 2015, members of the community who are researching and developing Turner Contemporary's 2018 exhibition about T.S Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, met at the gallery in Margate to discuss their thoughts on the terms 'agency' and 'intention'. They followed a philosophical enquiry methodology starting with the question 'Is not having an intention a type of intention?'







Intentions in Art History and Beyond


by Emma Brasó

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Fallacies

Art historians vary in their approach to artistic intention: some try to discover the purpose of an artwork in external evidences related to the life of the artist (like private letters, diary entries or even death certificates); for others, the verdict of whether the artist has succeeded in their creative intent depends entirely on internal evidences available in the artwork itself. While the former are accused of carrying out “the intentional fallacy,” the latter are described as perpetrating “the expressive fallacy”. Taken that both viewpoints present internal problems, some interpreters have tried to come up with hybrid conceptions of intention, while less conciliatory ones, like cultural theorist Mieke Bal, have rejected intentionality for being a concept inevitably compromised by its ties to individualism. In the exhibition *Agency without Intention*, the exploration of the term “intention” went beyond its strict application to the interpretation of art. And yet, the influence of its particular understanding in new art history—and more specifically, its radical questioning by Bal—is largely responsible for my own take on the concept.

Writing at the time of the success of neo-expressionistic styles in the art market of the 1980s, Hal Foster seemed dismayed: “Why, then, if the expressionist fiction seems so suspect, is it renewed today?”¹ For the art historians like Foster who were working under the influence of post-structural ideas (what is loosely known as “new art history”), such assumptions about the *expressive* value of art, concealed long-sustained ideological goals that seemed unaffected by the theoretical recognition of the constructed nature of all forms of expression. The “expressionist fiction” or “expressive fallacy” (as Foster titles his essays for reasons that will soon become clear) was not only practiced by artists and supported by art dealers; it also characterized a much disputed type of art historical interpretation that relied on the supposed “immanent expressive meaning” of the artwork, as the members of Art & Language ironically

 ¹ Hal Foster, “The Expressive Fallacy,” in *Recordings. Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1985), 75.

described it.² For art historian Rosalind Krauss the unproblematic use of terms like “originality” and “authenticity” tried to preserve the positivist interpretation of art—as well as the institutions defending such view—from the scrutiny of theory. Art & Language, on the other hand, censured the *expressive* critics for ignoring or hiding any reflection on the material conditions of production that made the artwork possible (for instance, the economic needs of the artist).³

Hal Foster’s essay *The Expressive Fallacy* is a direct a reference—a critical one—to a seminal text in literature theory, Monroe Beardsley and William Wimsatt’s *The Intentional Fallacy*, originally published in 1946. Focusing on poetry criticism, the essay is considered an early call to move away from the disproportionate attention paid to authors and their intentions when analyzing the success and meaning of poems. For Beardsley and Wimsatt, a poem does not belong to the critic nor to the author, but to the public: “It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge.”⁴ This public dimension of the poem implies that also the evaluation of the work has to occur in the *public sphere* without resorting to the author’s *private intention* as a judging standard. What they endorse as a correct method for literary criticism is one centered on what is internal (or public) to the poem—semantics, syntax, plus cultural references—, rather than what is external (or personal)—the author’s diary entries, letters, etc.

What constitutes the interiority and what the exteriority of the artwork—and their respective role in the interpretation of art—is a guiding principle to understand how art historians and critics position themselves in the intentionalist debate. In a case study on Edouard Manet’s painting *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (1882), art theorist Thierry De Duve’s accepts the methodological premises of Beardsley and Wimsatt with telling effects. The stated purpose of de Duve’s essay is to demonstrate that this artwork in particular is the painter’s “pictorial testament,” or, in other words, a *final* explanation by Manet of his own artistic innovations.⁵ In order to do so, de Duve goes through a detailed comparison of two contradictory models of perspective projection that could equally match the spatial construction at work in Manet’s bar. This exercise is supposed to follow a correct method in Beardsley and Wimsatt’s sense, for de Duve is careful to emphasize that he is supporting his analysis only on internal evidences available in the artwork itself instead of using external ones like the critical reception of the work at the time or the artist’s biography (although de Duve has external information like the fact that Manet died in 1883, soon after finishing *Un*

2 Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison, and Mel Ramsden, “Art History, Art Criticism, and Explanation” (1981), in *Art History and Its Methods. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Eric Fernie (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 266.

3 Rosalind Krauss, “Sincerely Yours,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1985), 193.

4 Monroe Beardsley and William Wimsatt, “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946), in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts. Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*, ed. Joseph Margolis (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 93.

5 Thierry De Duve, “Intentionality and Art Historical Methodology: A Case Study,” nonsite.org 6 (July 2012), accessed 3 April, 2015, <http://nonsite.org/article/intentionality-and-art-historical-methodology-a-case-study>.

Bar). The main problem that de Duve encounters is that in order to pick one of the two internally valid geometric reconstruction (and their respective conclusion about the painting's meaning), he must link the picture back to the artist's intention, and in the absence of external proofs, he must rely on his personal judgement. De Duve—who is aware of how by escaping the "intentional fallacy," one can end up producing an "expressionist fiction"—concludes,

In the absence of "external evidence" (a piece of writing by the artist, the reviews of the critics, the testimony of contemporaries, etc.), what access do we have to the artist's intentionality? None other, I would argue, than what I called aesthetic intuition. Is it methodologically trustworthy? The question will not be settled here, but it is raised.⁶

Towards the agency of images

Despite art history's problematic dependence on the correct identification of artistic intentions, for the art critic Thomas McEvelley, "it is clearly impossible to exclude the artist's intentions from the critical process" as information as apparently objective as the date of an artwork has an undeniable impact on our critical awareness of what we then believe the artist knew or intended.⁷ Such inevitability has fostered last-minute attempts to re-conceptualize the term, while the gradual transformation of art history into visual culture has facilitated other interpretations that welcome the possibility of applying the idea of agency to artworks themselves independently of the intentions of its makers.

David Summers' 1986 essay *Intentions in the History of Art* is a critical analysis of intentionalism that tries to come up with a hybrid conception of the term. The art historian starts by acknowledging that the abdication of what is exterior to the artwork implies both theoretical and historical challenges: on the one hand, it implies throwing "the whole burden of a work's significance upon its presumed formal expressive univocity," while, on the other, it ignores how socio-historical contexts play an important role in explaining why artworks are designed the way they are.⁸ In light of this, what Summer proposes is "a certain definition of intention" that will maintain the centrality of the work's internal evidences but will also be able to give a contextual or structural explanation for change. Such definition proposes that intention is never only a subjective act or individual will, but that intentions are inevitably tied to *trans-personal* circumstances such as the appearance of a new technique or the decline of a typology. For instance, if Leonardo da Vinci *intended* to paint a unique composition

 6 Ibid.

7 Thomas McEvelley, *Art and Discontent: Theory at the Millennium* (Kingston, NY: McPherson, 1991), 46.

8 David Summers, "Intentions in the History of Art," *New Literary History* 17, no. 2 (1986): 307.

of *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, he necessarily depended upon and transformed “existing technical and iconographic traditions” available to him at the time.⁹ Thus, if intentions are contextual and historical rather than only subjective and individual, Summers argues that it could be possible to recover them by analyzing how motifs, techniques, and formats (all trans-personal) are embodied *in the artworks themselves*. Summers’ explanation of how internal evidences are capable of accounting for exteriority is, however, compromised by the introduction of another concept, the “arbitrary”, which is how he justifies those “aspect of a work assignable to the artist himself as an agent,”¹⁰ in an attempt to avoid historical reductionism.

A different take on the part of history in the interpretation of the artworks—or, more exactly, on “the agency of images over time”—is pursued by the cultural theorist Mieke Bal.¹¹ In her view, the term intention has an implied positivism and individualism that makes it ill-fitted to account for “art’s effective and affective results” throughout history, including in the present.¹² To thwart intention, she introduces “narrativity” as a way to complicate the opposition between interior and exterior. Narrativity, in Bal’s view, includes in the explanation of artworks the way they affects us *now*, despite such effects being unintended, unknown or incompatible with the intentions of the maker. If, as she argues, we acknowledge “the temporal effect of delay as an integral part of the image”¹³ (or, in other words, if we accept that the internal analysis of the artwork has to contain the story of the processes through which in different circumstances art is able to signify differently), we could theoretically account for an image’s agency without either having to rely on the biographically verified intentions of the artists nor having to eliminate the socio-historical dimension of all interpretations. Bal’s narrativity is an invitation for the art historian and others to engage with the historical circumstances, personal interests and particular goals of all interpretations by critically acknowledging the active role of the interpreter, rather than focusing on trying to recreate the context, concerns, and intentions of the artist.

Conceiving agency without intention

Agency without Intention included four projects: two robots, a multi-part social sculpture, a recorded conversation, and a performance for four dancers. Each work approached the exhibition’s premise from a different angle, although the most interesting

9 Ibid., 311.

10 Ibid.,319.

11 Mieke Bal, “Intention,” in *Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 236.

12 Ibid., 263.

13 Ibid., 256.

moments occurred when the different projects overlapped. For instance, Abdulbari Kutbi's *Pirouette Robots* roamed around the gallery changing their direction of progress when bumping into any of the numerous plywood blocks making up the social sculpture *Liminal*, designed by Abigail Hunt and Kieren Reed. The robots were also the starting point for a conversation about agency and intention with the members of The Waste Land research group (this discussion was recorded before the exhibition and screened in the gallery).¹⁴ The Waste Land research group is a variable group of people who are jointly developing the content for an exhibition inspired by T.S. Eliot's eponymous poem. The outcome of this horizontally-curated experiment will be presented in the spring of 2018 at Turner Contemporary, Margate. I approached the organizer of this group, Trish Scott, to discuss with its members their understanding of agency and intention because I felt that their decision to work together and with an institution implied questions around these same concepts: What was the intention of Turner Contemporary to start such a socially-engaged, participatory project? What level of agency were the participants given? Was the intention of each one of them the same as the group's intention or the institution's one? Which one would prevail?

As said, we selected the robots to initiate this conversation, which then followed the format of a philosophical enquiry in which the participants were asked to agree or disagree with what had been said before.¹⁵ What the robots allowed was to present a very practical example of an agent without apparent intention: the robots were able to make simple decisions when confronted with physical obstacles thanks to a system of interconnected modes, yet their actions could hardly be interpreted as following a complex purpose of their own. During the subsequent discussion, references to the intention of the robots' designer were inevitably introduced, and the parallel relation between robot/artwork, designer/artist was easily established. It was encouraging, from my perspective, that several of the participants agreed with the possibility of artworks producing in the recipient effects unintended by their creators. There was also some confusion about the definition of the terms agency and intention themselves. Some people thought they were not easily differentiable, or that one was just the way through which you achieve the other. Despite these terminological difficulties, throughout the hour-and-a-half dialogue we were able to establish an important difference between the two concepts: while intention operates at a personal level (even in the case of *collective* intentions), agency is relational, always dependant on our position within a group or in a situation. Or, to put it differently, while the articulation of one's intentions—although inevitably influenced by contextual circumstances—remains in an ideal sphere, agency is intrinsically connected to action,

14 An edited version of the film recorded during the conversation is available online. Agency without Intention, Youtube, accessed 24 December, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gm9fODpVNrA>.

15 For more information on this pedagogical approach see "What is Philosophical Enquiry," *Thinking Space*, accessed 24 December, 2015, <http://thinkingspace.org.uk/about-philosophical-enquiry/>.

and therefore contingent to the distribution of power within existing social structures.

The conversation with The Waste Land research group introduced the split between agency and intention in the technological sphere where machines and robots that are apparently able to make their own decisions cannot be said to have intentions of their own.¹⁶ Another perspective on the both aesthetic and social implications of separating agency from intention was presented in the exhibition by the multi-part social sculpture *Liminal. Liminal*, composed by more than 70 wooden geometric pieces, was scattered throughout the floor of the Herbert Read Gallery with the *intention* that visitors would feel free to interact with the modules by moving, piling or sitting on them. The wall text in the gallery specifically referred to this call to action in the following terms: “Visitors are invited to activate the work with the hope that their participation will provoke moments of unsolicited disorientation, exchange, and discussion.”

In the case of *Liminal*, the work staged a situation through which to discuss the type of agency offered to audiences in supposedly interactive pieces. In recent times, numerous artists have produced projects which are configured as situations in which the public is supposed to participate in one or another way. This “relational aesthetic” as Nicolas Bourriaud described it,¹⁷ has run parallel to a discourse of social engagement, in which audiences are supposed to be *empowered* through their interaction with the art presented. Yet, many of such projects usually imply an under-discussed relation between the quite limited agency given to audiences and the very strong intentions of artists and curators.¹⁸ In the context of *Agency without Intention*, what *Liminal* allowed was to construct a fascinating socio-aesthetic situation in which the agency of audiences was being openly negotiated in relation to the intentions of the artists and curator, and the limitations of the institution.

Finally, the performance that Rosana Antolí conceived for the opening of the exhibition consisted of four dancers moving *disobediently*. Subtly at first and very noticeably as the event developed, the performers executed routines alien to the normative movement dynamics in a conventional art opening. The departing point for this commission was a political concern with the different roles played by agency and intention in recent protest movements worldwide. In preparatory conversations with Antolí, we were particularly interested in discussing how collective political efforts such as the international Occupy movements, or the Spanish “Los Indignados” had been criticised for their lack of concrete objectives. What their critics saw as a weakness, we saw as their main advantage: by protesting and defending political agency for “normal” citizens but not stipulating a list of

16 Of course, numerous science fiction plots revolve around the possibility of machines having their own motivations that contrast with those of the humans designing them. For now, though, that kind of artificial intelligence remains a fictional one.

17 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: les presses du réel, 2002).

18 For a critical assessment on the role of intentions in socially engaged art, see Erik Hagoort, *Good Intentions. Judging the Art of Encounter* (Amsterdam: Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture, 2005).

concrete goals, these movements were gaining political significance while avoiding the instrumentalization of their actions by any particular party. Although in a far less concrete context, the dancers at the opening were also clearly presenting alternative ways of moving and behaving, yet their intentions (as well as those of the artist) remained unknown. In so doing, their agency as disobedient bodies was evident, while also less easily jeopardized.

In her reconsideration of the role of artistic intention, Mieke Bal requests interpreters to acknowledge the theoretical and ideological positions of their *own* readings and presentations—a request that philosopher Rosi Braidotti so accurately reinstates as “Don’t do the God trick, don’t speak from nowhere.”¹⁹ Following their advice, *Agency without Intention* was conceived to investigate through art works and art-related situations a particular hypothesis about our present social order: that, in light of advances in technology and the limits of artificial intelligence, art’s institutionalized interest in the social sphere, and the appearance of political sensibilities that avoid becoming political parties, it is possible—and useful—to conceive agency independently of intention. However, that was only a position, for the projects presented in the exhibition exist beyond the particular interests, ideas, assumptions or economic needs of the curator, artists, and participants that were involved with them momentarily.

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19 Rosi Braidotti, “Thinking as a Nomadic Subject” (video of lecture, ICI Berlin, 7 October, 2014), accessed 28 January 2016, <https://www.ici-berlin.org/event/620/>.

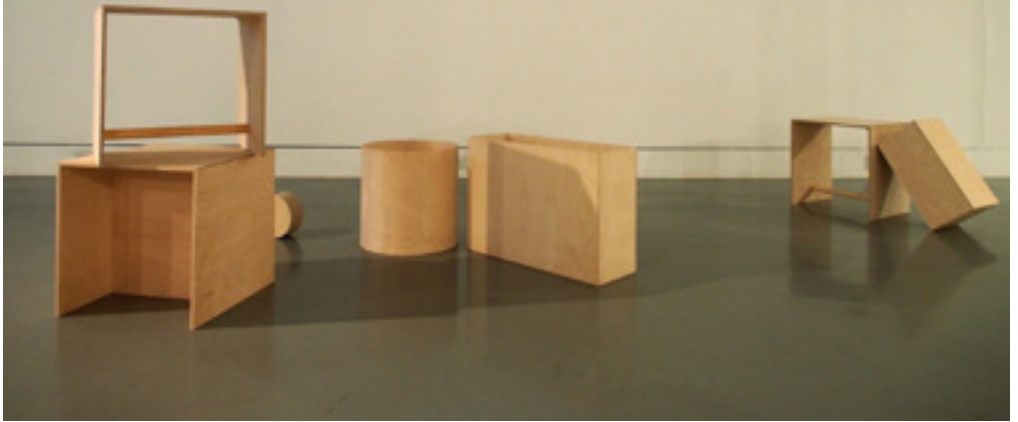








SILENCE IS SEXY







INDIVIDUALS ARE SEXY









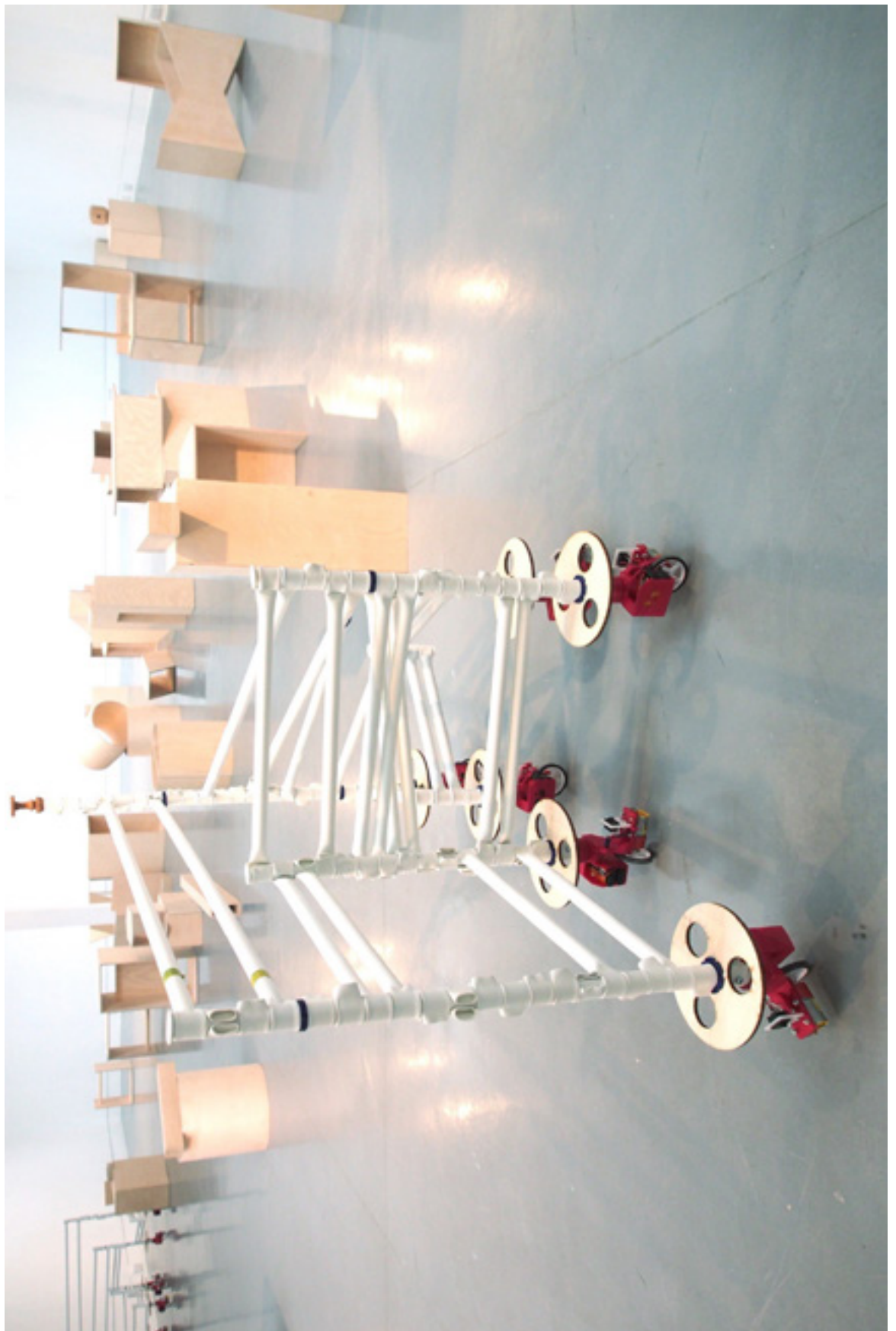




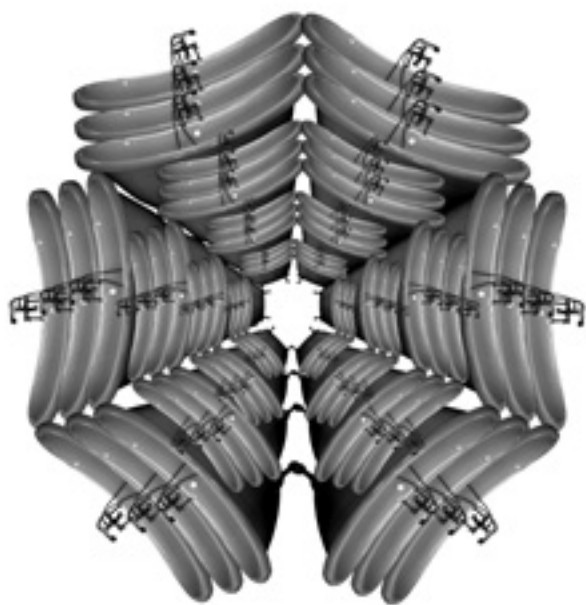


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The Space Between: A Personal Reflection on the Artwork *Liminal* by Kieren Reed and Abigail Hunt

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This text has developed through an ongoing dialogue between ourselves as artists and collaborators, audience members, curators and others who have come into contact with our artwork *Liminal* over the last five years. As our most significant collaborative artwork to date, we wish to offer a narrative to explore *Liminal*, where it came from, how we were influenced to make it, its methodologies, references and its impact as an artwork as well as its effect on our wider practice. We are keen to explain how it has changed our perceptions and influenced our ideas and thinking as well as how we now wish to move it forward as a continuing strand of our artistic practice. As an addition to this text we have included a lexicon of terms that we find continually relevant to us. We have chosen to define them within our own thinking and understanding, perhaps not always completely in line with an official definition, but giving an insight into our methodologies and ideas.

Liminal is a one hundred and twenty piece wooden sculpture of varying geometric forms. The artwork is activated by a relationship with its audience, who interact with it physically through touch, movement and composition.¹ *Liminal* has a familiarity to it, and we have always felt that this is one of the keys to its potential. Ideas of mimicking or repeating universally acknowledged shapes and forms sit comfortably with us as a homage to that which has gone before. *Liminal* sits somewhere between the possibilities of curated untouchable sculpture and the allowing of interaction and exploration of an audience role, in part reaching towards the educational. We have always been interested

1 Since 2011, *Liminal* has been experienced by over 40,000 people. It became the subject of the film *The Art Handlers* by artist Anna Lucas and was part of a research programme for Tate. It was also presented, exhibited and discussed at the *Inside/Outside: Materialising the Social* symposium as part of the series *The Tanks: Art in Action*, at Tate Modern and it has been shown in various spaces at both Tate Britain and Tate Modern. Notably it was shown in the McAullay Gallery, Tate Modern for a focused exhibition in December 2013. This followed a summer of events programmed around *Liminal* that public workshops led by us, the development of performance artworks and animations using *Liminal* and film screenings in collaboration with the Tate Archive. To date it continues to be shown at Tate Modern and as an artwork, it has been highly influential in informing education policy and practice at Tate.

Most recently a second part of *Liminal*, with some re-thinking and the introduction of some revised and newly created shapes and forms was shown as part of the *Agency without Intention* exhibition at The Hebert Read Gallery in Canterbury where it was interacted with by two *Pirouetting Robots* by artist Abdulbari Kutbi, and human performers as part of new work by Rosana Antoli. It was also altered and used by the public throughout the duration of the exhibition.

in this positioning and the awkwardness and indefinable nature of *Liminal* as an artwork. This has created opportunity for the piece and yet has also created its own frustrations for us in terms of how the piece is considered, discussed and contextualised by others. The name '*Liminal*' references the space between; a fluid place where the possibilities of change have the potential to take place. We titled it as such, both because this not quite definable moment was key to the meaning and aims of the artwork, but also because we wanted a simple single word which we hoped would become descriptive of its very self.

The decisions on the forms and shapes of *Liminal* were explored initially through drawing shapes, creating paper constructions, having discussions with each other, and considering what would fit together physically and visually. We didn't want to over complicate the forms the sculpture took. They were created and explored openly, within part of a normal studio practice—not pre-designed, but created through a making process. Some shapes didn't make the final set. Others were altered or introduced later. Form, balance and negative space were all important. As were the relationships between different pieces and the idea of multiples and sets. Observations of our (then) two year old son and his capabilities of building affected our thinking. What help did he need to work with these shapes? Physical help in moving and lifting—yes, often. Mental support in the consideration of his actions with them—much less often. These actions of building are central to play. Left with a set of pieces or objects of any kind, even a very young child will explore their physicality through touch. Groups of, or individual, adults are also inclined to pick up, touch and explore objects with their hands and fingers, as long as the situation in which they are offered objects isn't restricted by social constructs of expected behaviours. Creating and imitating (consciously and subconsciously) architectural and sculptural spaces is a natural activity for the human involved in the act of play. The familiarity, yet ambiguous and not directly representational nature of the modular type blocks and shapes that make up *Liminal*, makes suggestions for creating and building. There lies a potential for testing ideas and placing basic elements together to explore the relationships between them. The nature of the *Liminal* pieces enables a spontaneity in their use. They hold potential for simple and fast interactions or allow a more considered approach to the forming of relationships between the shapes.

The production of these elements evolves in the studio. We imagine forms, make references, construct and edit. We imagine how they may be used, how they might be placed together; what fits where, how a block might sit. We consider the relationships shared between the pieces. Collaboratively we explore and develop ideal formations but these explorations stay within the studio and as a key reference point. Photographic documentation of the work only happens after it has been used.

We found that as a commissioned artwork within an educational/participatory context we had more freedom in making, in that the work had an openness and possibility for continued editing. We also had access to different funding through the possibility of working on related programming on and around *Liminal*. This positioning created difficulties

in how seriously the artwork was considered by some. An educational context immediately encouraged considerations of the work around play and creativity. We equally wanted to explore functionality and the use value of these pieces and what their wider impact could be. They hold other possibilities for practical use, as seating, shelving, display and screening. We have explored performative elements—creating things to set rules, carefully considering the passing of elements from one to another, documentation through moving image, using the blocks as a starting point for perspective drawing, and for highlighting relationships between *Liminal* and other artwork in the gallery context.

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When we first created *Liminal* we were interested in capturing and allowing the processes of the studio to become more exposed. The touch of the artists' hand on surfaces; the movement and shifting of ideas through placement of pieces; the endless possibilities of arranging and rearranging elements, building and rebuilding, constructing and deconstructing; the capturing of a haptic and the experience of weight, surface and texture. We wanted to explore the knowledge and understanding of a material that takes place on a deeper level when the sense of touch is added to that of sight. Looking to present the possibilities of usefulness—function and practicality to work alongside the visual and aesthetic of decision making—we were interested in taking that exploration of object and material which usually happens privately in the artists' studio and *unusually* make it a part of the gallery space and the gallery experience. For us, art, and in particular sculpture, is a physical thing—a relationship between the hand and the object. Much art history and theory talks of such, but on exhibiting in a traditional scopic centric gallery context, that understanding of touch is usually removed from the visitor experience, even often placing a second element of glass or a barrier to add to this removal.

A few years ago when visiting a Jeff Koons exhibition, we witnessed a family having a conversation that illustrates this point. A father was looking around with his two teenage sons and he was telling them that they must not touch any of the artworks. The sculptures on display were inflatable beach toys cast in highly polished stainless steel. Visually they were so close to the original objects it was questionable that they could be anything different. The younger son, choosing his moment carefully, reached out and touched one of them and his father (but not the gallery invigilator) seeing him, quickly reprimanded his behaviour. "But I wanted to know if it really was made of metal" the boy said, justifying his act. "Otherwise it could just be a beach toy". "Well it's not allowed" replied his father as they continued to look around. A short time later, the dad was overheard to ask, "So, what did it feel like?" A lovely descriptive discussion followed as the boy, after only one rapid stolen touch was able to describe the coldness and the weight of the object to his rule bound father.

When the gallery removes the possibility of touch, a real awareness of an artwork can also be lost. What the boy said is true; without confirmation through touch how can we know that these artworks are what they claim to be? And without that touch, does it matter if they are or not what they say they are? The boys' father wanted to know too—even though

he knew through learned and widely acknowledged gallery behaviour that it wasn't allowed.

We have deeply considered and remained aware of our relationship with damage and failure. The simple fact was that we were preparing *Liminal* for daily handling in the gallery space and for things that we could not predict, would largely not witness and would not be in control of. The elements of *Liminal* were made under normal studio conditions and the individual pieces were tested for strength and durability. This, for us, makes for a slightly perverse way of creating an artwork. As part of the process of making, each type of block was held above head height and dropped. Dropped until it cracked. Dropped until it smashed. Then assessed for the points of weakness, remade, strengthened; altering adhesives, fixings and joints. The feeling of destroying in the studio is nothing compared to the moment, on the first day it was open to the public, of watching someone else holding a piece aloft and hearing the sharp thwack as it hits the floor. That first time staying intact. Over a short time eight pieces of the same shape were identically crushed at a weak point we hadn't first noticed, leading us to revise and alter continually. This raised questions and discussions for us about expected behaviours, unspoken gallery rules, public pushing boundaries, and of how much information we needed to supply the public with in order to protect them and the work? These are interesting discussions and perhaps are still not completely resolved. We gave over the control of the artwork, we watched it evolve and initiate discussions, some of which we were part of and some not. Authorship is part of our considerations. We are interested in the handover and the experience of letting the work go and of giving over our control.

We believe that there is a tacit knowledge that surrounds and supports *Liminal*. This may be due to its familiar nature and its visual relationship with play or play apparatus, or it could be in the forms which are similar to furniture or functional objects that we are surrounded by. It also holds within it a familiarity of material and the softness of wood. It feels under our hand as we would expect it to. We are not drawn to touch it because we don't know what it would feel like, more because we do know and we are expecting something which is then confirmed through our fingertips. The substance of *Liminal* wears down gradually, taking on some of the residue of the space it has shared. It gathers the sheen of the polish from the floor, dust collected within its corners, markings and scratches from clothing, jewellery and other furniture, biro markings from low level graffiti. These traces become part of its history. The nature of unintended changes to the piece sits alongside the considered modifications which take place through its use.

An important intention of *Liminal* is that it is used. It's active. We perhaps didn't quite realise just how vital this was when we first made it and we always envisaged it to have a more reflective static context in its future. Our original thinking on this was challenged when we were invited to be part of a small group of participants who would interact with Rasheed Araeen's artwork *Zero to Infinity*. At the time, we were really considering how *Liminal* was being contextualised by others and we had a really strong desire to move it away from its participatory use into a different phase of itself which would change it into a more

traditional and formal artwork. We felt this shift and reconfiguration would help the artwork to be considered in a different context. Taking part in the performance for Rasheed was invigorating and insightful. He talked to us later at length, identifying that once an artwork has been removed from you, you no longer have the agency over your work (idea) and that this can be difficult to come to terms with. He talked about ownership and value. *Zero to Infinity* was always intended to be handled—by many people—really until its point of destruction. But that destruction was really insignificant, because it was this use that was the value in the work. Rasheed's critique was that the preservation and continued conservation of the artwork (because of its value relating to his success and recognition of him as an artist) was affecting this original purpose. Not by much but significantly. It was difficult for this to be anything but a static work, only activated very infrequently (the performance we were involved in, was the first time it had been handled in ten years and we were also given gloves to wear and strict instructions as to what was and was not allowed in order to preserve the work), because otherwise it could have been damaged and its scarcity as an object would be questioned. The interactions and Rasheed's intended hopes for the work can only exist now in the main through photographic documentation and some video (of our recent performance), but this is a problem we could see he was still having to deal with. This conversation with Rasheed and the resulting discussions we had after meeting him, really affected how we thought of *Liminal* and altered our desires for it to become fixed. Our concern with its recognition by a knowing art audience is integral to it as a piece of work and is central to what we are trying to explore with *Liminal*. This shift in our thinking has been highly influential in how we now see the work and in how our ideas are moving forward both in terms of the piece itself and other artworks in our wider practice.

The conversations we had together after meeting Rasheed fed into continued thoughts about agency and ownership, authorship and the roles of audience. *Liminal* is often discussed in terms of 'agency'. Indeed, at the Herbert Read Gallery it appeared as part of an exhibition with an exploration of the intentions of agency as its title. We are interested in this consideration, but we have struggled with 'agency' as a term and its implications on and around socially engaged practice. *Liminal* in its very being is about passing over the possibilities of what it can become to others and this is not something we find particularly easy, but is something we are fascinated by. As *Liminal* continues it could perhaps be seen to be authored by us, but as something we certainly don't retain agency over. This has created artistic and aesthetic questions for us and our practice. This very point is perhaps where the strength and interest in the artwork lies. We are also interested in the idea of the ego, in exploring where we place ourselves as artists and as the directors of visual decision making. *Liminal* leaves us with that tension. It enforces an artistic confrontation in witnessing an aesthetic that doesn't always match our regime or our intention. And then there is the issue of others seeing the piece in a configuration or setting that is not part of our own visual thinking but that visual, whatever it is, is always associated with us.

This play on control and ownership of the visual has come up for us in other artworks

(KADN kiosk, 2007). In the past, we have taken back the aesthetic when it ventured too far from our own, incorporating methods within our work to ensure we retain some visibility, some presence of our intentions for the piece. *Liminal* also has this. It does not invite the incorporation of other elements in the gallery space, but yet it can be used with those things that happen to be around it— gallery architecture, furniture or people. *Liminal* does not have a set parameter and as much as we have defined its edges within the gallery space, there are many possibilities for how it may look. The gallery space perhaps works to create the social structure that aligns the norms to allow for agency to be given away at moments as part of an un-verbalised agreement between us as artists and the audience. Physical engagement is invited, but it is also so loaded that it is not possible to negate it. As artists we are interested in the potential of forgoing agency, allowing interaction and participation in the creative act. *Liminal* is very open and has many potentials, yet this potential is still controlled and set within rules which fit within ideas around social norms and expected behaviours, play and risk.

Liminal allows an engagement with an artwork in a different way. Unlike placing a painting on a wall or a sculpture on a plinth, it can be something else to each person who comes into interaction with it. It can be shifted by an individual, a group of people or even a robot. We as artists can use it to programme additional content—perhaps within a performance, built up into a screen to show a film, as a table or surface for placing a drink, for leaning on, as a place to rest, to contemplate, to wait, to watch. It can become a play thing, a static configuration, a moving element in a film. Its use might include the people around it, or it may be moved around, placed and left. Its use may be considered or incidental, conscious or less so. We have always felt that in its simplicity, people know what it does, they know how to use it and the knowledge around it as an object is tacit. This gives agency. We have long questioned and suggested that it is in this movement, this use, this interaction that the artwork 'happens' and without this interaction, this explored intention, the artwork is nothing more than a set of wooden blocks. But thinking this, it became an artwork from the first moment it was moved by someone other than us, and now, even when it rests in storage, it is an artwork for the happenings it has undertaken and the history of its interactions. Though we still retain agency over *Liminal* as a whole, perhaps on a different level agency is shared between those others who have used it in many different ways.

We continue to move our ideas forward, to see how the sculpture evolves and to consider what its potential might still be. We work to consider and explore its alterations, its shift in pushing forward, to move outside, to become more incidental, to work more casually within a space, making further references to functionality and working beyond individual pieces. How can *Liminal* influence games and play to a continued degree and alter, impact and affect programming even more? Our relationship with *Liminal* is that the work is in flux, never finished. It is for us a critique on commodification, a critique of conservation, of happening and of when to stop. *Liminal* is an idea that is still growing up. It is active and alive through its movement. In time it may grow into this, into that, into something more. The

pieces are picked up, moved, reflected upon and moved again. We like how it looks in this configuration, but who knows what the next grouping will bring to our thinking.

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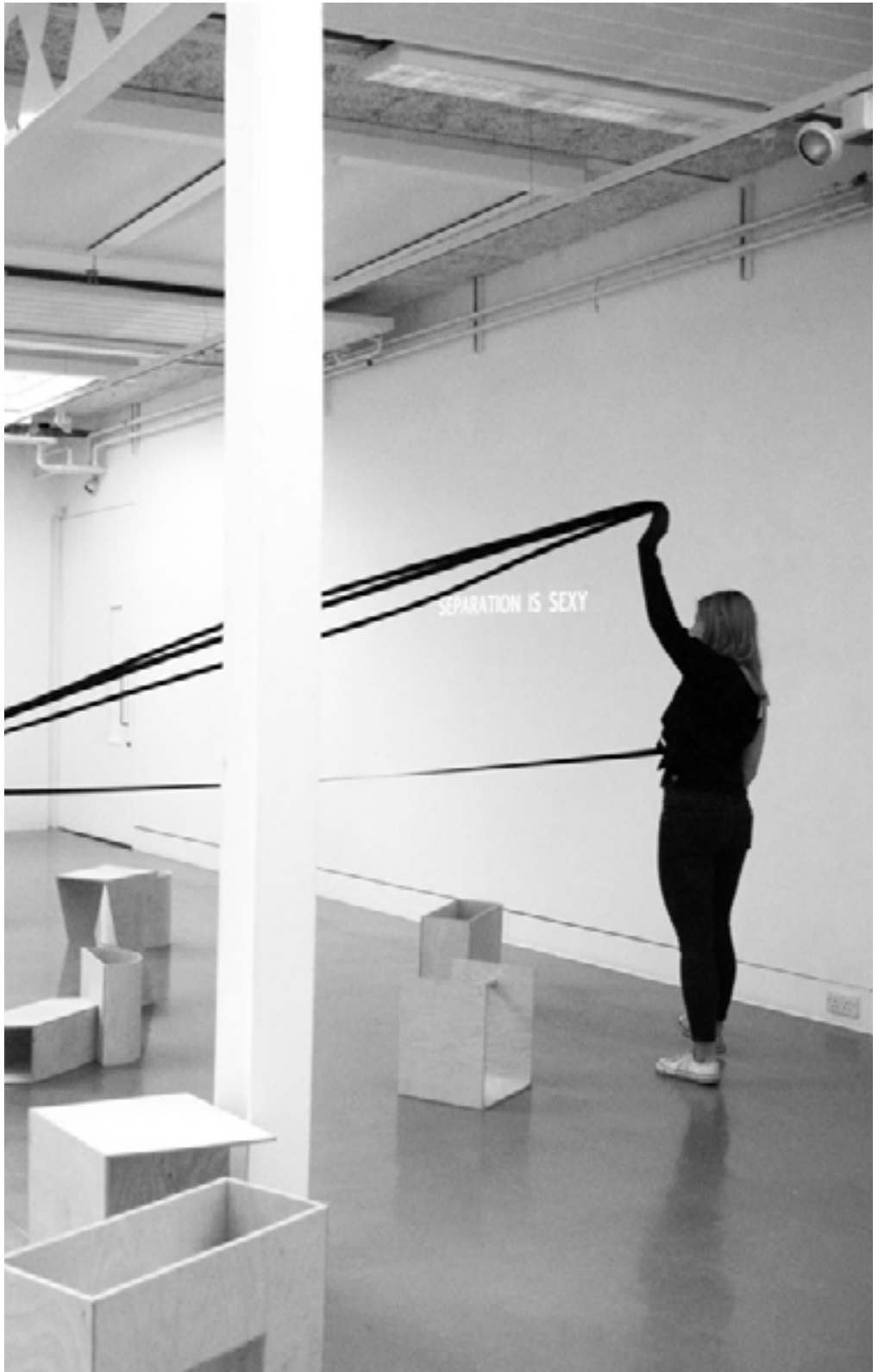


A Lexicon of Terms we find ourselves using in reference to our artistic practice or that we are particularly interested in with regard to our artwork *Liminal* by Kieren Reed and Abigail Hunt

Some of these words we offer our own definition of, others we just wanted to include as we think they are valid in this set of thinking. This list is presented in no particular order—except being the order of a thought process.

liminal: the space between, a space that holds the possibility for something to happen / **agency:** action or intervention producing a particular effect / **tacit knowledge:** knowledge that is difficult to share through the use of words or descriptions but that can be shared through alternative means if given enough time / **formal:** when the aesthetics are obvious / **naming:** definition / **audience / participant(ion) / user / perform(er/ance) / activate(ing) / viewer:** audience not physically involved / **worker:** Fordist / **technician:** title given to those in the gallery who supported the public's use of *Liminal* / **block / element / form / piece / cube / object / work / original / play / interaction / intention / haptic:** interaction with something using touch / **materiality:** applying the use of materials in building and making things / **rules / risk / value / worth / scarcity / method:** how it's done / **gallery / furniture / edges:** in terms of both the edge of the object and the boundary of the gallery / **struggle / question / point / confrontation / creative act:** Duchamp 1957 / **social norm:** known or expected behaviour / **active / static / future / remove(d) / edit / collaboration / ideal formation:** our imagined configuration of elements or blocks / **aesthetic regime / education(al) / continued editing / programming:** scheduled actions / **functionality:** practical use, possibilities for such / **creativity / use value:** functionality / **impact:** the affect / **seating / shelving / display /**

screen / practical use: functionality / **studio:** private space, making space / **weight:** in relation to the body / **material knowledge / usefulness / scopic centric:** concentrated or orientated around visual experience / **self reflective / influence / methodologies:** our thinking and how we do it / **lexicon:** the vocabulary of a branch of knowledge / **ideas / geometric / untouchable sculpture:** see social norm combined with scopic centric and gallery / **audience role / design(ed):** similar to an artwork / **negative space:** the places in between the pieces and the gaps and voids inside the blocks themselves / **architecture / architectural space:** relation to volume and the body and surroundings greater than the body / **sculptural space:** relating to the object and thing not necessarily relating to the body / **modular / static configuration:** when *Liminal* has been left by a participant in a particular position / **considered / incidental:** happy accident / **game**



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