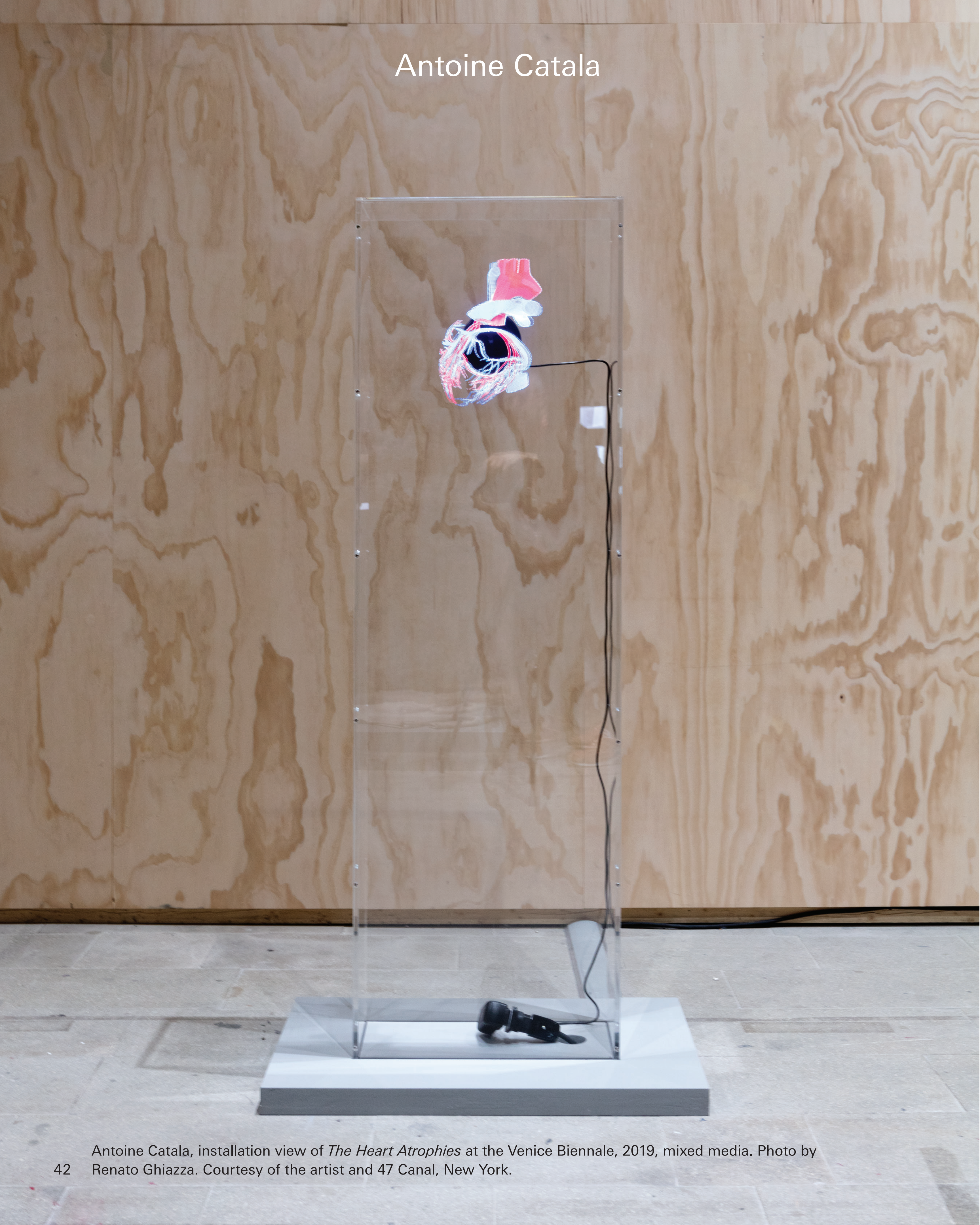
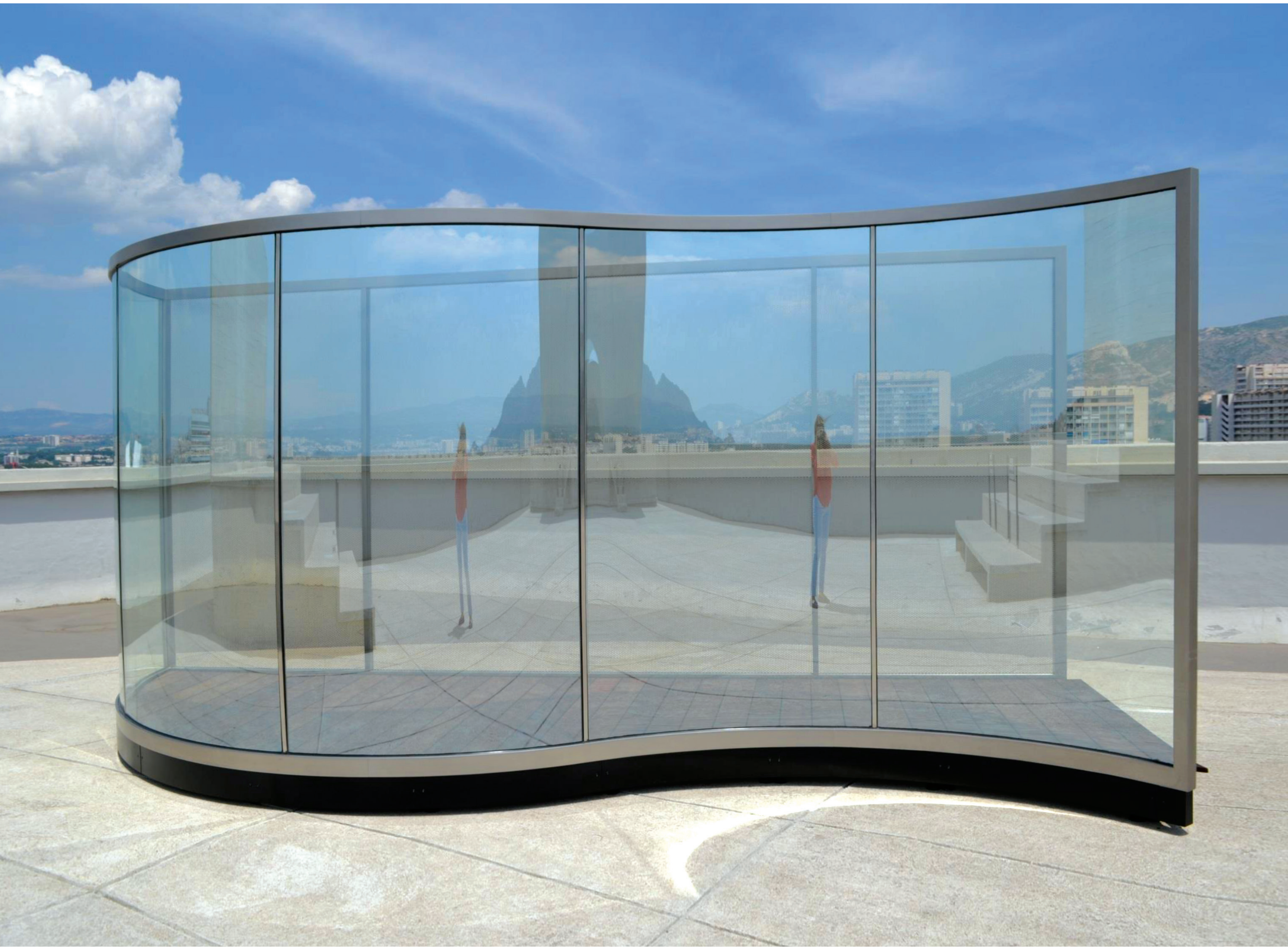
Antoine Catala



Antoine Catala, installation view of *The Heart Atrophies* at the Venice Biennale, 2019, mixed media. Photo by Renato Ghiazza. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York.

and Dan Graham



Dan Graham, *Tight Squeeze*, 2015, two-way mirror, perforated metal, and stainless steel. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris.

The French-born, New York–based artist Antoine Catala has described his installations as "walk-in rebuses," wherein messages are puzzled apart into disparate arrays of word, image, and object. The works are, in fact, often caught between such states, manifesting as holographic animations, drone-mounted signage, or pneumatic letterforms and screens that "breath" in and out. While unabashedly playful and even candy-colored, the inflatable works evoke both a pop-up notification's cheery buoyancy and the wheezing of a hospital respirator. Catala's recent materializations take their cue from web-based communication technologies and social media, quite literally blowing up or asphyxiating short bursts of language and emoticons.

Early in his career in New York, Catala worked briefly as an assistant for the artist Dan Graham, who notes that they developed a "dialogue and had a shared passion for certain corners of American culture." While Catala might skew toward expressions of the tactile and Graham, with his ongoing series of glass and mirror pavilions, toward manipulations of the optical, both create situations of psychological dilemma, just as pleasurable as they are uneasy. In the following conversation, they tease out more affinities and underlying impulses.

DAN GRAHAM I've been thinking that you're more French than you seem to be. I mean, you call yourself French, but that's actually a brand of a cheap mustard here in America.

ANTOINE CATALA (*laughter*) Ouch. You might be hitting a vein here, since all my work is about being a foreigner looking at American culture from the inside. That's why some of my earliest work tackled television; it's the first thing you see when you land here: TVs playing CNN as you queue through immigration lines. Now my work has shifted to deal with (mis)communication of feelings—and, like most foreigners who live in the US, I understand nothing about the way people of this country deal with their emotions.

DG Well, I got a chip on my shoulder regarding French artists that I'd like to air out: I've always hated Duchamp. What I don't like is that he thought art was a game he could win, and that would be the end of art. I always thought that led to Andrea Fraser-ism, and also to Daniel Buren.

AC Why Buren?

DG When I was teaching in France the students never talked about their emotions or childhood memories. Young artists are always dealing with such things, sifting through them, but instead these kids saw everything as a problem to be solved. The French are taught Cartesian logic, and people from Normandy, like Duchamp, can be quite cold in my experience. What's wrong with Buren, though, is the fact that he doesn't have any ideas. He took a lot from Dan Flavin and simply made it into a logical system.

AC I feel it's hard to do something new after Duchamp. Perhaps there's room to expand on a couple of his works, but he generally goes to the very end of an idea rather than opening up prospects. It's different with Man Ray, for instance, who kept opening doors.

DG What's really interesting is Duchamp's sexuality. It's known that when he was about forty he was compelled by financial straits to marry a local bourgeois woman, which was rather disturbing to him. His idea of sex was voyeurism. His last work [*Étant donnés* (1946–1966)] involves looking through peepholes and, for me, this obviously shows his fear of Courbet's frankness, the implication of direct bodily contact with another. But it occurs to me, despite the cool reserve, as another logical chess player, your game piece is all about touching. For me, the best work of Duchamp is the urinal. For me as a man, uniquely.

AC Yes, my tactile board game [*Insecure Attachment*, 2015] has some sexual overtones. It's similar to a simplified children's version of chess, and the idea is that the pieces are connected by these tethers or umbilical cords. Each piece can only move so far from another, and their shapes are very particular, only fitting into compatible holes. These holes are made of silicone, so inserting and removing them gives off a very sexual sensation.

DG I remember you liking to flip through the books I have on Franz Erhard Walther in my studio—mostly in terms of the material he used and the fact that it involved putting work onto the body. You're into motions along the body's surface.

AC His work gave me all these ideas, absolutely, and I really wanted to make new, tactile, wearable works, pretty complex in terms of production. Every time I propose the idea for a show, it gets turned down.

DG In general, people are now reading Walter Benjamin as if he was a philosopher. I see him as a literary critic and collector of picture books. There's a short essay of his about the importance of the rebus in French picture books at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They may have, in a stretch, led to French Surrealism.

AC Rebuses are quite Lacanian too. For him, this is how the mind functions.

DG Benjamin always exaggerates, though—kind of like I do. I think he overestimated French Surrealism. And maybe I've overestimated the importance of the

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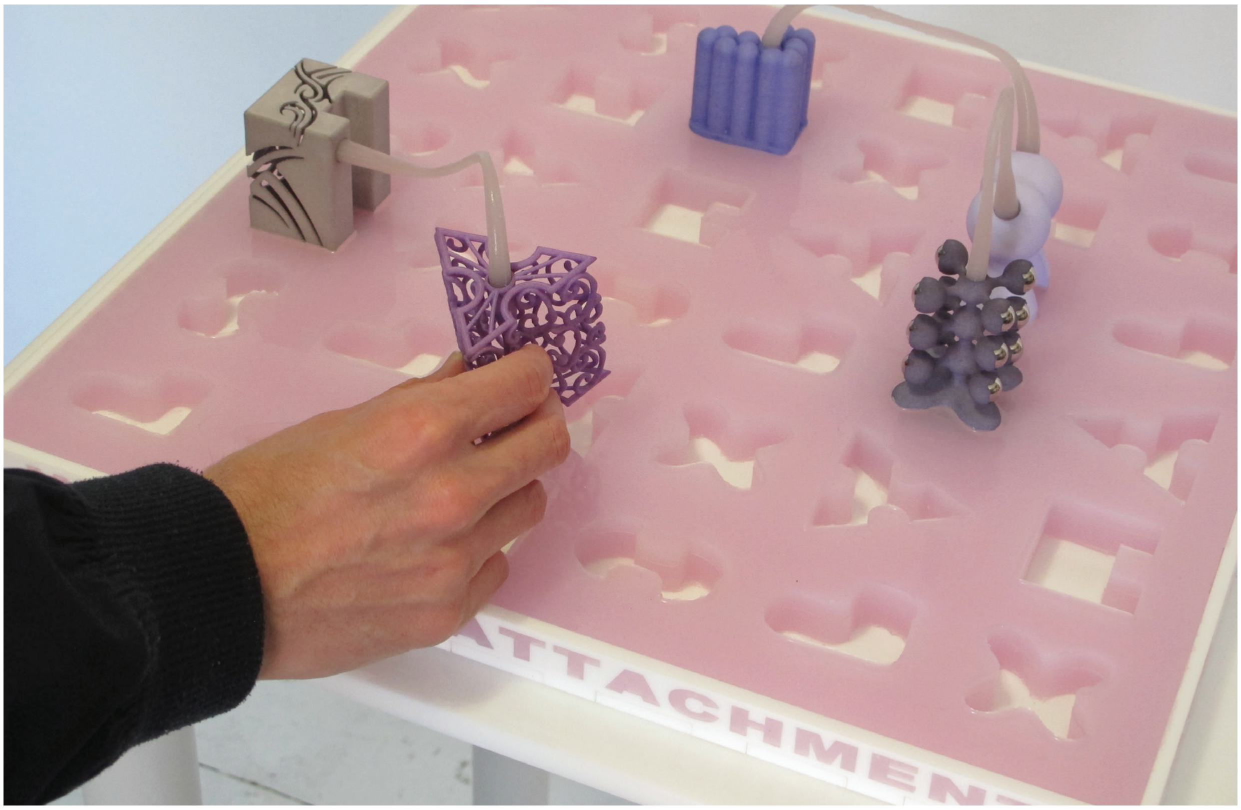

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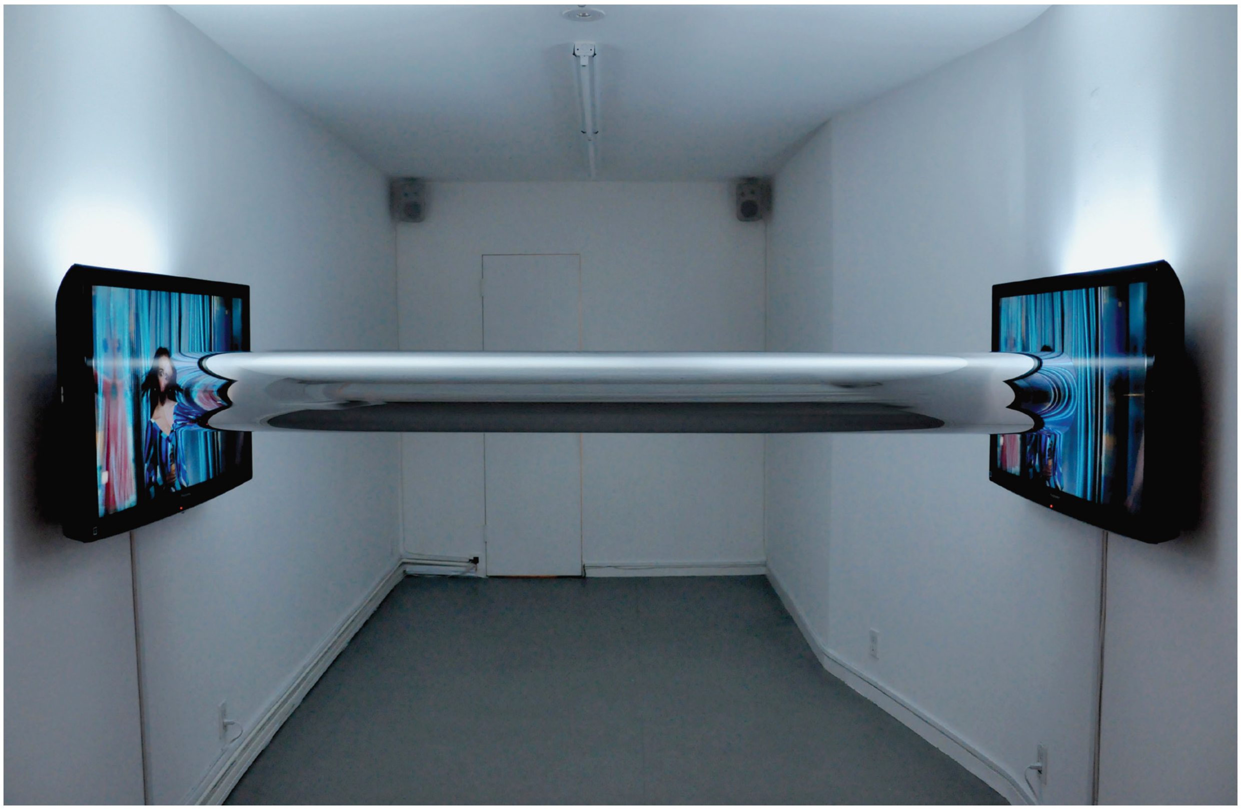

Antoine Catala, (i) *Insecure Attachment*, 2015, acrylic, nylon, steel, and silicone rubber; and (ii) installation view of *HDDH* at Audio Visual Arts, New York, 2010, flat-screen televisions and mirrored tube. Courtesy of the artist.

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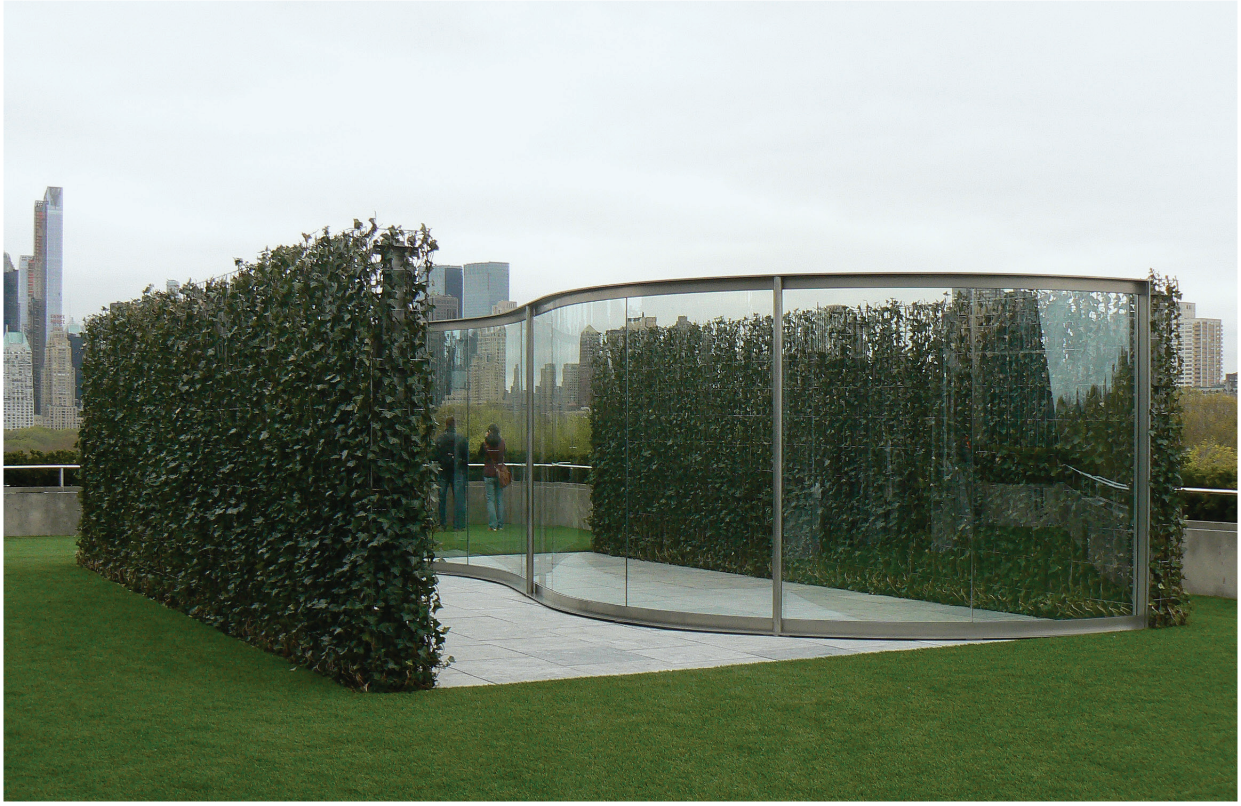

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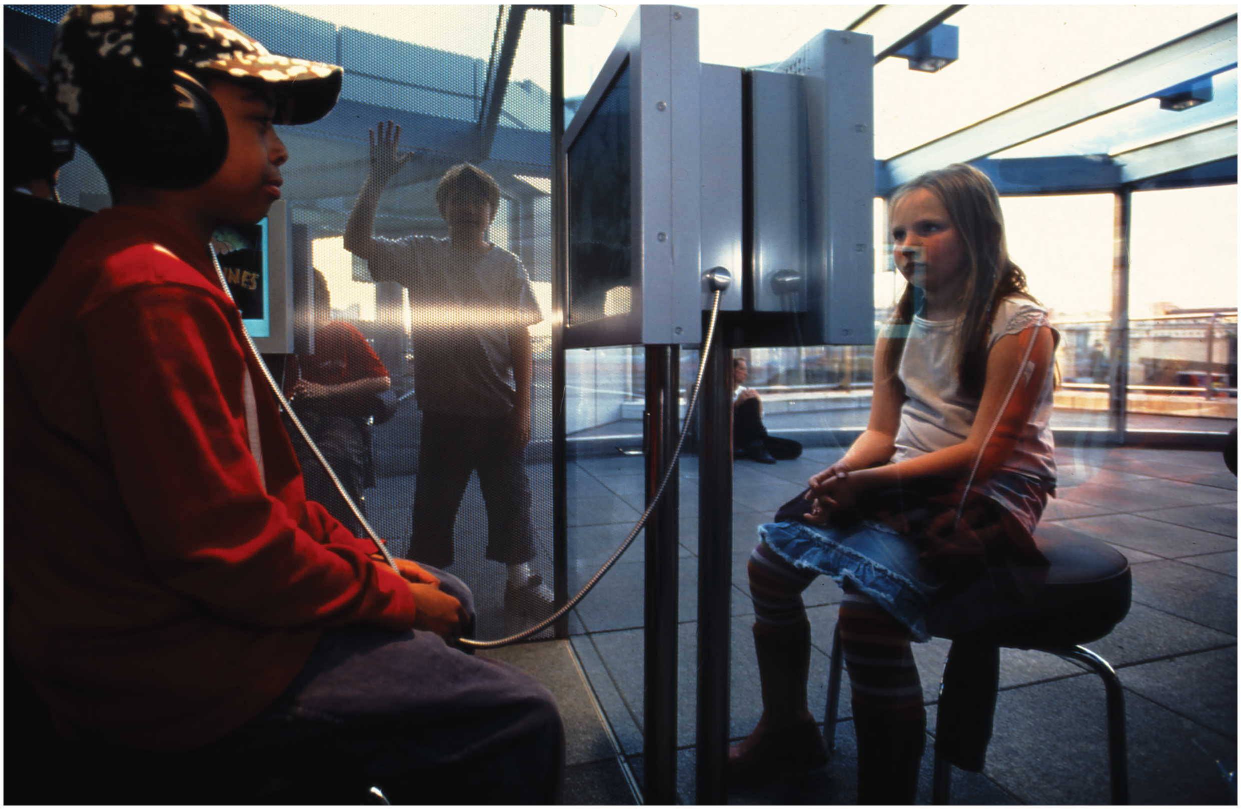


Dan Graham, (i) *Two-Way Hedge Labyrinth Walkabout* (with Günther Vogt) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2014, two-way mirror, stainless steel, ivy, and synthetic grass; and (ii) children watching videos inside *Waterloo Sunset* at the Hayward Gallery, London, 2003, two-way mirror, glass, steel, wood, and touch-screen monitors. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris.

> In my own work, walking around is important because not only do you see yourself seeing in the reflection, but you also see other people seeing each other as you see them. —Dan Graham

rebus. But I bring this up because a work of yours that I love is a picture book.

AC You mean the small square book I did with Linus Elmes in Olso back in 2013 [for the show *Image Families*]? The one where you press buttons on kittens or bare asses, then a computerized voice speaks?

DG Yes, it's astonishing because it's shocking and fun at the same time.

AC It's a childlike book about computers learning to work with images and language. Rather stupid, but I believe in stupid.

DG I think artists like John Miller like the idea of shocking people by invoking shit. Your piece has that same jolt, plus it unfolds in your hands. And the book is a great medium—a form for the average reader outside the gallery or museum walls.

AC In terms of shock and fun coexisting, I must say it took me a long time to appreciate that there's a profound ambivalence to your pavilions. While they're playful, and one can often see children running around inside them, they can also be claustrophobic and a little oppressive as an environment. They have both feelings, both effects, and so they're not too rigid in how people read or interact with them.

DG People always bring up Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage"; that's how they understand my pavilions. I first encountered Lacan in a simplified article in *Psychology Today*, then some of his work in translation, but he's rather schizophrenic on the page. (My own writing is a little schizophrenic too, sure—like my article "Subject Matter" [1969].) I hate to say it, but I now think of him as a bit of a hack, taking his ideas from bits of other academic sources: for example, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and Kurt Lewin's use of topological diagrams to illustrate psychological interactions of people in groups. I remember being in junior high and really getting into Sartre's *Nausea*, which led to *Being and Nothingness*. There's a section in there about the gaze that was influential. All of this is a factor, but what are really important to me as influences are post-WWII-era playgrounds, like what the architect Aldo van Eyck did in the Netherlands and what Noguchi did in America during the same time period.

AC You showed me these, so beautiful.

DG I have a great fear of playgrounds, though. They're dangerous.

AC (*laughter*) The irony!

DG And as a preadolescent I had a strong preference for optical things. My father and I made a telescope, then I started an astronomy club with some friends.

AC You built a telescope?

DG Yeah, from a kit, and I would take students—some of whom were rather beautiful but unavailable thirteen-year-old girls, as I recall—to the observatory in Princeton to learn about the stars and planets. In the summer I would play with a magnifying glass, killing insects on the sidewalk.

AC It takes a lot of patience to kill insects with a magnifying glass. I've tried.

DG I think you're kidding, Antoine. You just focus the light! But you did once tell me that your father, whom you didn't know too well, was an inventor of contraptions, which leads me to your kinetic art—some of the best work of yours that I've seen, but not commercially viable because they all eventually fall apart, self-destruct.

There was a certain moment in European art when the best kinetic artists were Jesus Soto, originally from Venezuela, and Hans Haacke in Germany. Also the early work of Joseph Beuys. It's a great challenge now because every approach in the arts narrows into a revival of some sort or another. You've managed to revive the idea of kinetic art with color and illustration. There's enormous potential there.

AC My friend, the artist Dean Kenning, says kinetic work is the most ridiculous art form. What I like most about it is that it's self-deprecating. It's funny to see something move, but also fascinating, and even scary. It's essentially performative. All of which I appreciate in your work, as it's always self-aware.

DG I should tell you about the origin of my pavilions then. I thought, Why not combine telephone booths and bus shelters with Mies [van Der Rohe]'s Barcelona Pavilion?

AC Ah yes, your early pavilions at Documenta were so much like phone booths.

DG And as it turns out, the proportions were just right for visiting student-types with sleeping bags who couldn't get a hotel!

But growing up in sub-suburban New Jersey, I was always asking my mother to take me into New York City to eat cheap steak at a place called Thad's or buy stamps for my collection. What I noticed most were the big department-store windows. Later, I started thinking of the Barcelona Pavilion as an allegory for the whole Weimar Republic—a glass showcase where Mies could display luxury furniture, an advertisement for the new republic's best products. The important thing in both instances is that you walk around the display. In my own work, walking around is important because not only do you see yourself seeing in the reflection, but you also see other people seeing each other as you see them.

AC I always come back to this story you told me years ago about a zoo that has since burnt down. It was somewhere near Philadelphia, and the monkey cages were made with two-way mirrors. When a visitor looked in, they would see themselves superimposed onto an ape.

DG It was in Antwerp, actually, and it's all been modified now, quite different. But it was the first architecturally brilliant zoo. Just as you enter, there's a big mirror, and it says in Flemish: *Most Dangerous Animal*.

AC (*laughter*) But wait, there's a two-way mirror as well, right? And so the people see their own faces on the monkeys, and in turn the monkeys can presumably see their faces superimposed on the humans? This is how you described it to me, and something I've mulled over.

DG No, that's a fantasy of yours. But like a zoo, a sculpture park is often a mixture of children, parents, and grandparents on a very boring Sunday. People tend to regard my work as another sculpture within that park context, but Peter Fischli says it operates more like Georges Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. I never liked Impressionism, but I came to realize that a good deal of it is about people laying in the grass. In *La Grande Jatte*, working-class people take time off and look at the spectacle of one another looking.

AC That's very you.

I'm still thinking of your story about the zoo. Whatever exaggerated version I've made up in my head sounds pretty compelling! There's a second thing that I definitely took from you, though, from all our time together: you always come from a sense of pleasure. Your work itself doesn't really criticize. If you make a video like *Death By Chocolate* (2005), it's about the pleasure of being in a shopping mall. If you do something like *Homes for America* (1966–1967), it's about the pleasure of owning houses outside the city. Even when you do something within the grounds of a corporate building, it's about the pleasure of experiencing their atrium or garden. I'm struck by this clear sense of why these works exist in the first place, what predicates them.

DG When I did *Hedge Two-Way Mirror Walkabout* (2014) with Günther Vogt at the Met, the curator suggested that it be about looking at the treetops of Central Park because I'd noticed they could be seen through scraggly little hedges at the roof's edge. I also noticed that the surface of the roof itself seemed to be made up of rather decayed AstroTurf. So I decided to use the material in the work because people who read the *New York Times* hate it. They relate it to sports and low culture, regarding it as an annoying, nontraditional art material.

AC Yes, you're always mischievous. Around that same time, in 2015, I did a whole museum installation with a garden of AstroTurf for a show called *Jardin Synthétique à l'isolement* at the MacLyon. What's so odd is that people were eager to use the fake garden I created, choosing to lay down inside the museum for long stretches of time when just outside there was a beautiful, natural, outdoor garden.

Somehow this reminds me of how I wanted to write about your work back when you felt that you didn't have any real peers. Paul McCarthy and Raymond Pettibon are big fans of yours, I think, like many other LA artists. I keep coming back to this one aspect of what you do, something that rarely gets talked about, something absent: along with the pleasure factor, there's this particular sense of entrapment or discomfort. This is what might link you to the West Coast artists.

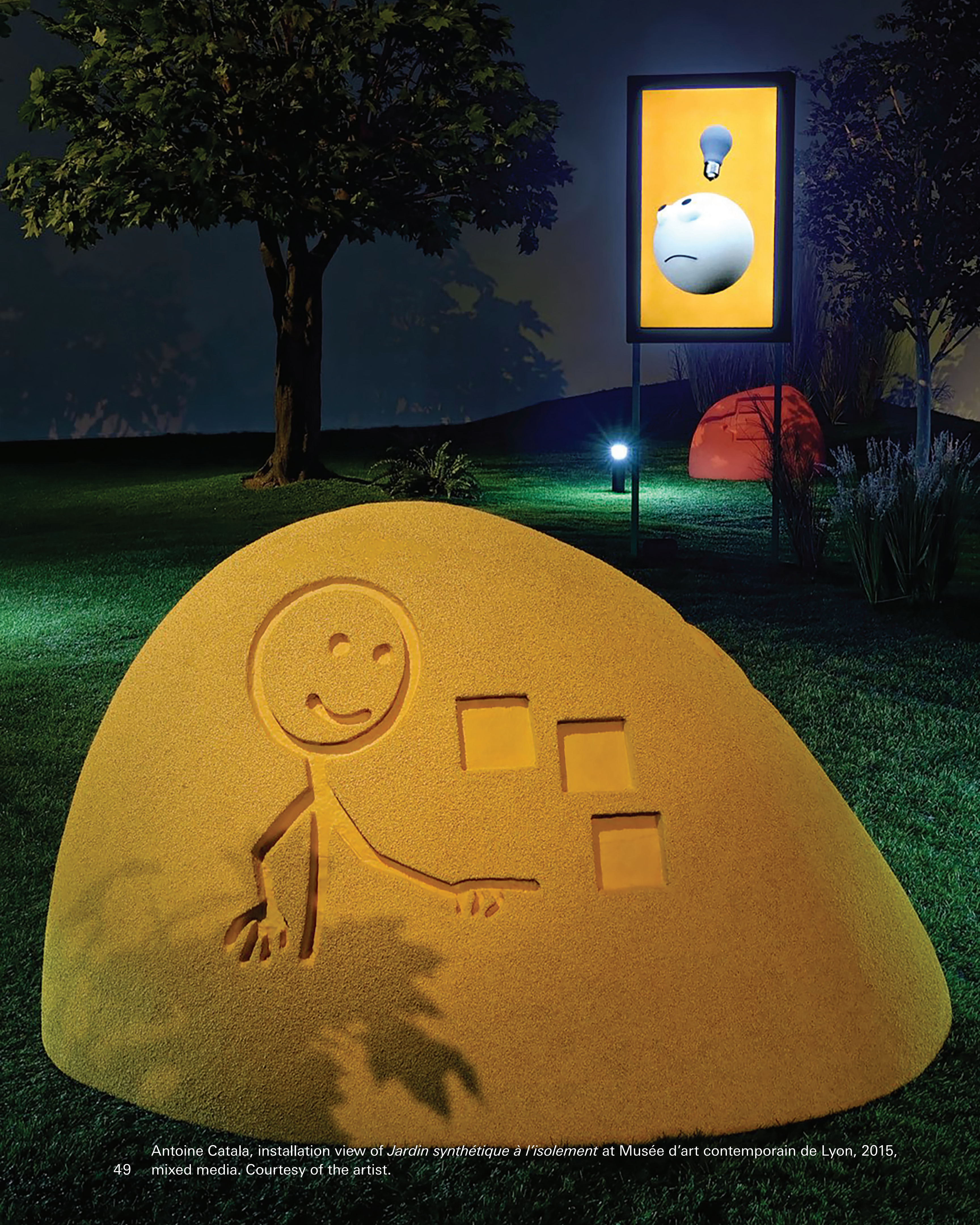
DG For me, that really comes more from Bruce Nauman. The people who write about him often miss this angle, but he's from Indiana, and so I think his work could be about the entrapment of individualism.

AC Yes, completely! The entrapment of being a person.

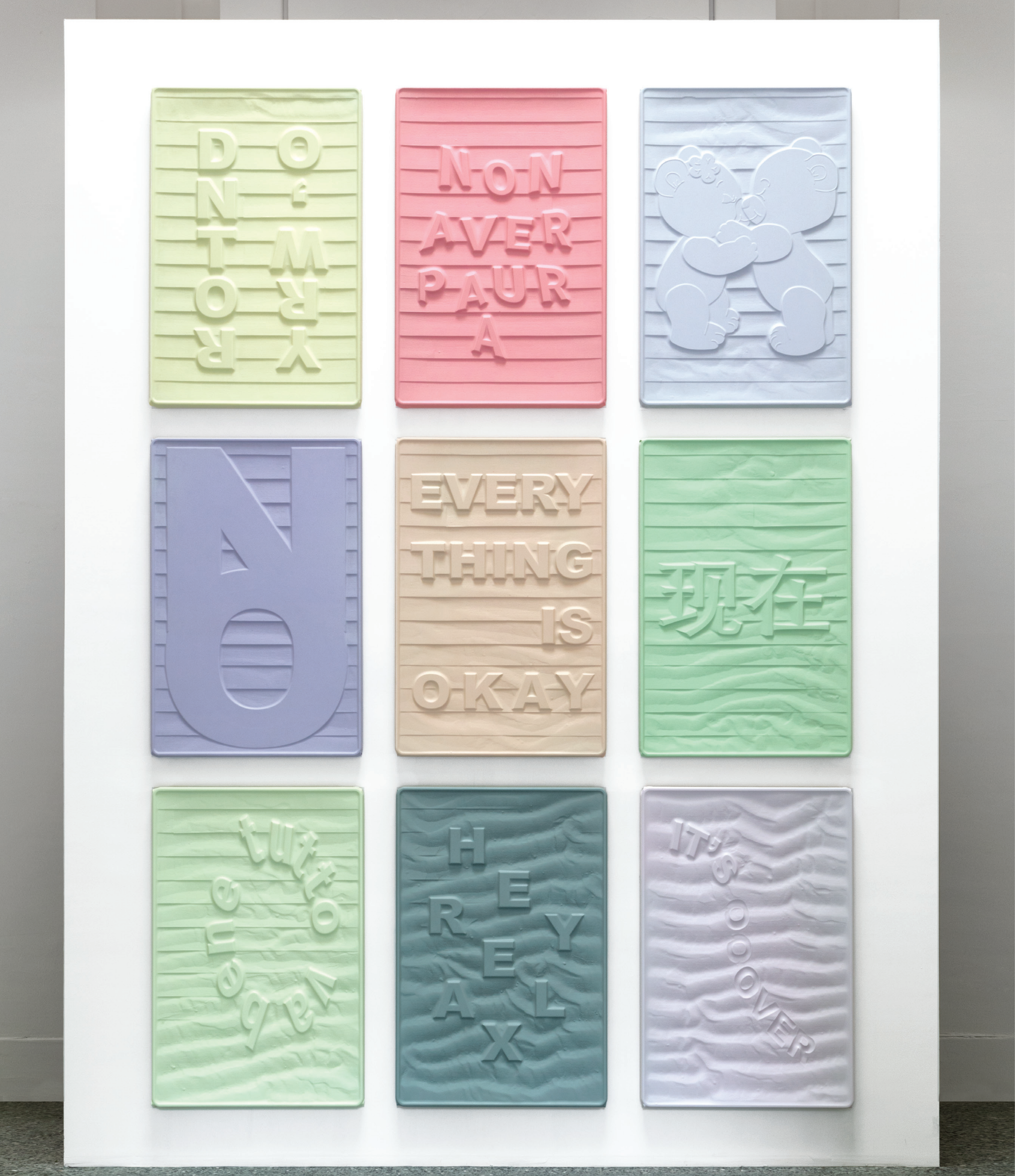
DG And of American individualism specifically.

AC I would agree. I often think about this pressure and entrapment in conjunction with current communication technologies. It feels so pivotal now, this desire for individualism among the many—almost a dictatorship of self-expression.

DG But let's switch from discomfort back to pleasure for a moment and connect it to repose, to lying down. The importance of this posture also comes from the hippies of the 1960s. Back then we were interested in relaxation. There's John Chamberlain's foam



Antoine Catala, installation view of *Jardin synthétique à l'isolement* at Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, 2015, mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.


DON'T WORRY
NON AVER PAURA
EVERY THING IS OKAY
现在
tutto va bene
HEY RELAX
IT'S OOOVER

Antoine Catala, *It's Over*, 2019, silicone vacuum panels, pumps, and tubing. Photo by Renato Ghiazza. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York.

Something I like about kinetic sculpture is watching an audience look at the work. I can step back and observe their sense of pleasure or displeasure because the work is out there performing in front of them all the time. —Antoine Catala

couches, for example, which he put in the lobby of the Guggenheim. From the top of that very hard architecture, you could look down into the rotunda below and see people flopped out on soft furniture as if in a drug state, their bodies limp. I was always fascinated by the body in a state of leisure.

AC Whereas for me, I think my best work comes from the fact that while I might come off as relaxed, I'm in fact pretty repressed—and in a way that I don't show my aggression. Somehow I show up as confrontational in the work. I think this is because I was raised by a single mother, who I felt I could never risk upsetting. And I was also afraid of being further rejected by my father, the forever absent engineer. Let's face it, an art practice can be pretty good therapy.

DG All the Capricorns I know, like you and Rodney Graham, say they're repressed and use hallucinogens to break free. Maybe in your case it comes from a French literary tradition beginning with hashish, or in the case of Henri Micheaux, using peyote to create a kind of delirium.

AC I don't much like hashish, actually. Just shrooms.

DG You also enjoy another very French hallucination—cinema. For me, relaxation and inspiration come from rock music, which I often experience as a kind of psychic delirium. When I was younger I would go to these informal concert situations, where artists would perform rock music in small spaces. I even found that I could, as a spectator, semi-dance.

AC Like most Frenchies, I was a colossal film nerd in my youth. Now I've rediscovered dance parties, which provide a different sense of community than the art one, one that I really enjoy. Relatedly, something I like about kinetic sculpture is watching an audience look at the work. I can step back and observe their sense of pleasure or displeasure because the work is out there performing in front of them all the time. With flat or inert works, it's difficult to gauge what's going on reception-wise.

DG When I see people looking at my work, I notice things I had no idea were there. Many artists probably enjoy this vantage. Also, these large exhibitions in Europe often have a didactic theme, so I like to undermine it and see how that plays out. Benjamin Buchloh and Andrea Fraser talk about deconstructing museums as being important, but for me this idea is almost a revelation.

In the '60s, at these big shows like Documenta in Brussels or Münster, which make use of historical gardens, the situation was really that the general public, middle-class people, were driving through in automobiles. And the experience was understood as a mix between entertainment and education. It's against Euro Disney.

AC Because of the idea of culture.

DG Yes, left-leaning sociological types thought of tourism as a trap. Entertainment had to be vilified, and so Documenta became a mixture of two intentions. Catherine David wanted her Documenta to be like an encyclopedia, whereas the earlier director, Jan Hoet, wanted his to be a circus. It was kind of a theme park to begin with, the way it was conceived—art as a tourist attraction.

AC And what would you say museums are now? How have they evolved?

DG There are three stages. At first museums were historical buildings, surrounded by landscape parks often from different historical periods. My work encompasses some of these historical overlays. Then in the late '80s, they became engaged with educational programs, because that's how the money came in. I got interested in putting a children's daycare center into a museum lobby, and later did a mezzanine area in London called *Waterloo Sunset for the Hayward Gallery*. It was free for people walking along the Thames, a place where children could watch cartoons as well as Arts Council England videos by contemporary artists, and it was also used by the museum's educational department for children to make their own artworks—for example Lichtensteins, if that's what the Hayward was showing. Finally, it could be used for evening events like banquets.

Now, in the third stage of this evolution, museums become about spectacle. You get a lot of people in there for the corporate funding. And it's specifically about the high-tech spectacle. There's this new museum in Rome, the one designed by Zaha Hadid—

AC MAXXI, the National Museum of 21st Century Arts.

DG Yes. It's totally a manifestation of this, and The Shed in Manhattan is too.

AC Well, didn't this all start with the Guggenheim, where the building itself is more important than the art inside?

DG From my point of view, the turn toward spectacle began with the Tate Modern, which resembles a corporate atrium.

AC Indeed, I was there when it was being built. They were throwing parties already.

DG It's interesting in that it began with a preservation effort of sorts, a kind of industrial archeology. Herzog and de Meuron designed the Tate with the image of Battersea Power Station in mind. All these new museums are in some significant way replicas of industrial facilities. I think this has to do with the flow of groups.

AC It's a numbers game, yes.

DG The Whitney occupies the old industrial railroad area next to the Hudson River. And the idea with Dia: Beacon was to convert and vivify a very big, old factory. I'm afraid it's a mausoleum, though.

AC Ah, but that's the very logic of Dia. It's a solemn, church-like experience when seeing the artwork inside.

DG Heiner Friedrich, who is from Munich, conceived of the Dia as a kind of Valhalla—a spiritual experience where the artist is a high priest who creates art in isolation and the public gets to see the art as a quasi-religious experience. This was very typical of and similar to what the late nineteenth-century Munich King Ludwig II did for Wagner. But again, Dia: Beacon is a mausoleum. The Flavin display, for me, was a disaster. His work was always best seen in a gallery situation, because it destroyed all the other work.

AC Oh really, I've never actually experienced it that way, where it competes.

DG It just destroys everything nearby. And even when you look outside the window, there are afterimages floating around. Flavin was a little perverse. He was trying to destroy color field painting in particular. In this respect, his work within the context of group shows is quite important.

But again, when you deify an artist, the museum becomes a mausoleum. All the worse if it's a living artist being mortified. It's a matter of isolation. I'm sure this is what Mike Kelley died of—a lack of social bonding. And Donald Judd went mad in Marfa, paranoid, shooting at airplanes. But the larger point is Flavin and I got our ideas from being antagonistic to the situation offered to us.

You've talked about something similar, about preferring alternative spaces—their oddly placed columns, the whole idiosyncratic nature of such buildings, the comparative lack of bureaucracy. In New York in the beginning, all the best galleries were in fact just old buildings.

AC It's different now, of course. The museum is a ship with a crew, so it gets difficult to do what you want. One can't even change the title of their own show three months before the opening; it's already too late! Then with galleries you have an imperative to sell.

You've done so much different stuff and in such different contexts.

DG In the '60s I wanted to become a writer, but being an artist allowed you to do anything. Andy Warhol was a great writer—dyslexic, but very good. With art, you can travel and educate yourself. Also the first artists I knew, Flavin and Sol LeWitt, were guards at MoMA during a Russian Constructivist show. That work came out of a hybrid situation involving art, architecture, and design.

For the International Garden Show in Stuttgart, I designed a skateboard pavilion, because then, in the 1980s, skaters were basically banned from city parks. It was a two-way mirror pyramid with the top cut away positioned over a bowl covered in graffiti. The skaters would be able to go up in the air and experience a kaleidoscopic distortion of the surrounding corporate architecture. It was about inserting psychedelic feelings inside the fascist monolith. At the moment, I'm trying not to be against corporate culture, at least not in the way that many socially critical artists are. I now want to coexist with it.

AC That's always been your position, though.

DG Well, it's just more interesting than dismissal. I think my skill is in the lesson. And now, though my work is still close to sculpture, I've shifted closer to what my favorite architects are interested in.

AC Yes, but you offer a sense of humor and self-deprecation that they don't.

DG Well, all the best artists use humor.

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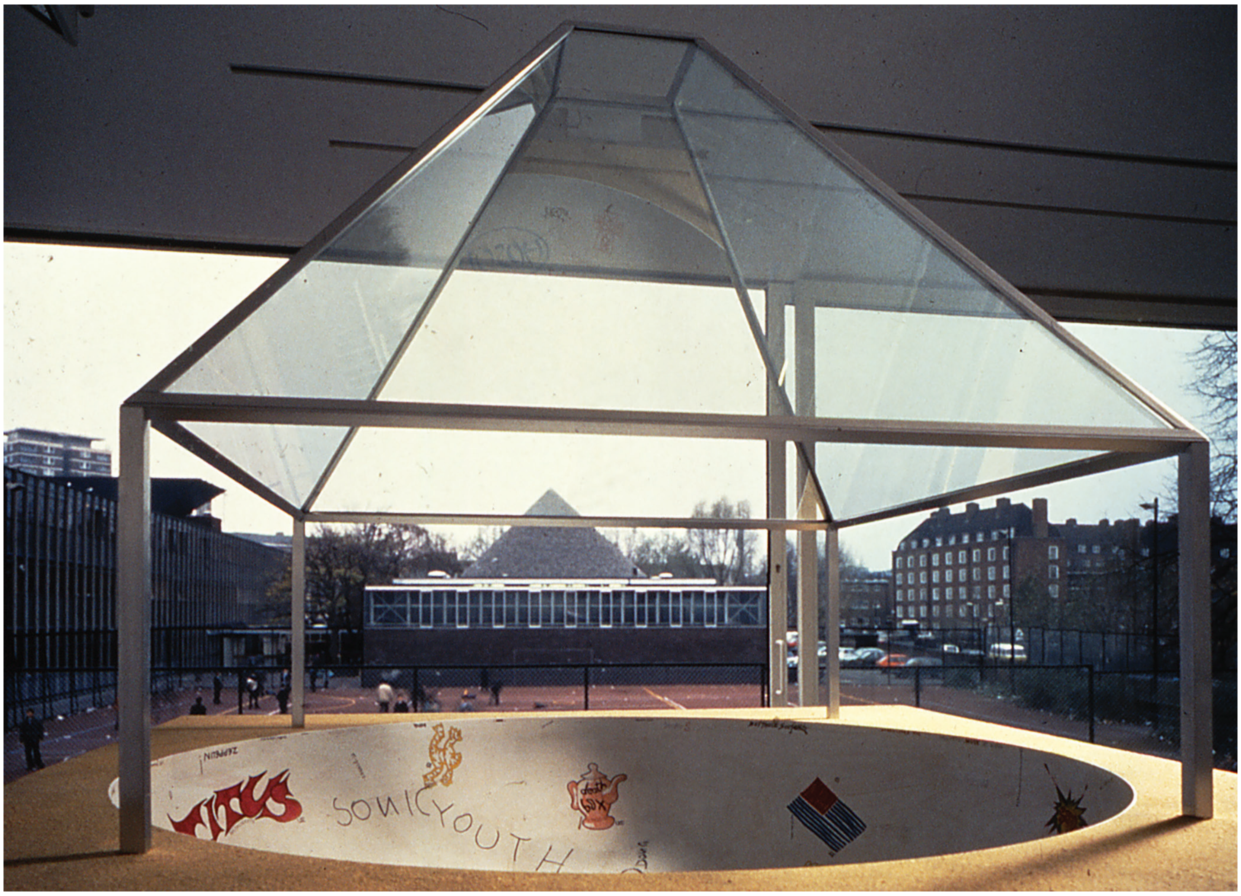

Dan Graham, (i) still from *Death By Chocolate: West Edmonton Shopping Mall (1986–05)*, 2005; and (ii) *Skateboard Pavilion* (model), 1989, two-way mirror, plastic frame, aluminum, and graffiti. Courtesy of the artist.