

EMILY ROYSDON

If I Don't Move Can You Hear Me?

MATRIX 235 DECEMBER 12, 2010—MARCH 4, 2011

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM AND PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

Conversation between Emily Roysdon and Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator Elizabeth Thomas

ELIZABETH THOMAS: I want to start with improvisation because I think it's something that is explicit in the form of the work you do but is also very much a part of the development of the ideas that ground the process of making.

EMILY ROYSDON: For the past few years I've been engaged with improvisation on a conceptual level and in my recent projects it's also manifesting as the practical and material nature of the work. The emphasis on improvisation in both material and conceptual form is because the work is very much about the dynamics of a lived life, very much about interactions and collaborations with other people and about bringing things into the world. It is a realm in which that kind of interdisciplinary production and thinking is possible. It does come from a self-motivated resistance culture and the DIY ethos and legacy are a huge inspiration for what I do. On a conceptual level, with projects like the exhibition of other artists' work that I curated, *Ecstatic Resistance*, I was relating improvisation specifically to struggle and the way that those two things mirror each other.

ET: Specifically talking about struggle and improvisation, there's a way in which those terms relate to a vocabulary of dance and movement but also to a real-world positioning of people's improvisatory action in the world.

ER: An ability to be responsive to what's going on around us, and I mean that in every way. This process of improvisation is about being present someplace and arriving with a series of thoughts and then unfolding these thoughts with the people and things around me.

ET: Since you've touched on this notion of being present, and making within the conditions that surround you, it seems pertinent that we talk a little about the process that you've been undergoing for this particular project.



ER: I come to this project with a vocabulary and a series of questions. Then I throw a bunch of tangential ideas up in the air, and I see how things land and then follow through on a few elements. I always take this thinking to the most complicated place it can be and then I pull back. What we'll see in the gallery, and part of my process, is a distillation.

ET: These initial thoughts, I know they follow a trajectory from recent work in Stockholm?

ER: I went to Stockholm with a very specific vocabulary of use, regulation, frame, and structure. I engaged a site there, *Sergels Torg*, which is the central square in Stockholm used for organized public demonstration. I was very much thinking about it in relation to people's idea of public space and as a functioning public space that people believe in. With that vocabulary came a kind of formalism that surprised me. These four words, a structure, created a square. I didn't want to start

a project with a square.

ET: Because it's too stable?

ER: Yes, exactly. It's too stable—a square doesn't make a good project. So, then came the gesture, which was to push it. You still have this idea of geometry and all the ideas that come along with it in terms of harmony, but I focused on creating something through the smallest possible gesture, one hand, a push, to create instability. You don't build with a parallelogram. This year has me working on a collection of related projects, *Sense and Sense* in Stockholm, which included the *Sergels Torg* work; the *West Street* book in which I engaged the archive of the photographer Alvin Baltrop to look at the piers of the West Village, an unregulated public space in Manhattan legendary in the gay power movement; as well as this MATRIX project. One of the things they have in common is that they all deal with the idea of public space—fantastical, lived, endured, desired. This comes from working ideas of collectivity, representation, choreography and me developing projects that happen in “public” spaces, for more than the camera. They all interact with this vocabulary of use, regulation, structure, and frame. I began thinking about regulation, moving into an understanding of planned use and then into a repurposing of space. With each project and site a different set of questions develops—sometimes more theoretical, sometimes poetic or practical. Recently I have been thinking about how a site can cease to be a place in any lived or functional way and become only a reflection of the laws that govern it.

So the translation into this project at Berkeley is to carry over that investigation of public space—people's belief in, even more than their use of, that space. If I'm thinking about instability and about the use or repurposing of space then I'm thinking about those kinds of boundaries. That comes with me to Berkeley, a place where I've had experiences before and where I have paid some attention to what the current scene is on campus and the history of the campus in particular. So I have thought about the idea of a place, thinking about how Berkeley's legacy is as present as its present. It is legendary in such a way that it does become idealized and abstract, and that becomes a site in and of itself that will manifest in the images less representationally or indexically and more through other kinds of iconography.

I've been building this visual archive of movement and I've often worked with the performance artist MPA to create what is now a sort of toolbox of gestures. Each project has its own tone and shape in terms of the poses and movements I am interested in, and these become part of the printmaking process, they are the actions performed on top of the image, the representation of movement layered in isolated stills.



Beyond that I'm very interested in the museum building—there is an irresistible frame in the intersecting lines, the light, all of the shades, so the building was an interesting location to make images of time and instability.

ET: Related to that instability, I think if you look at the original drawings, there are no right angles in the larger structure. Although it is built out of concrete, one of the most stable materials, its architectural harmony doesn't rely on the rectilinear. But back to movement: you've referenced this vocabulary of movement—can you talk about the senses in which you employ that term?

ER: One of the first studio visits I ever had was with Yvonne Rainer, and when I started talking about a series of photographs I had made she said, “you're a choreographer.” I forgot about that for years but recently found it in an old

notebook. It was true, everything was about getting people to move together. Much of that was for camera, but it also applies to my investment in a collective practice and collective identity. Early on this manifested in my experience with *LTTR*, the queer art journal for which I was an editor and founder.

ET: One of the most interesting things about the way in which you think about language is to place pairs of words in relation, but not dialectically. And they simultaneously have this relevance to a theoretical framework, a framework of practice within the art world, and also translate to a language of being in the world.

ER: The vocabulary and the words that stick with me for years, like movement, or improvisation, relate to all these parts of my practice and are complex enough to be generative of numerous projects in theoretical, material, and practical ways. With movement in particular, I think about it now in terms of political movement and then the more formal way of thinking through the body. In terms of political movements, I originally studied international politics, critical race theory, and history of social movements in college. It was a few years into working as an artist that I was able to think more thoroughly about the relationship between the performance of collectivity and the issues of representation that come along with that, and how that intersects with political movements.

ET: Of course movement is also implied in film and video; I know that you're working really specifically with editing to complicate the relationship of stillness and movement within the moving image.

ER: From my very first video I have manipulated real time and played with the expectation of action in moving images. And yes, I use video more like "a moving image" than for its narrative potential. This comes from wanting to deconstruct a natural sense of time, and wanting to focus on the interplay between bodies and the frame of the image. I have experimented with this in two extreme directions—with either heavy editing repeating the individual frames or by making very few cuts. But both have the effect of de-dramatizing action in order to alter the expectations of viewing and the force of realism.

And between the video and still images I want to create a tension about where you would expect to see action and so that's where a lot of the layering of movement gestures comes in.

ET: So in this project in particular, there are ways in which these senses of your practice and its interest in movement and collectivity are being manifested, through the silkscreened photographs and the videos. But then there is this publication which is equally important to the exhibition and which is itself an exercise in collective movement, moving other collaborators in an exercise to define the vocabulary that you've outlined for the project. It also ties back into the ideas about

improvisation in terms of allowing your ideas to go out into other people's brains before they come back to you.

ER: The writing projects are really important for me right now. I was and have been moving through this vocabulary in different configurations for the last year, and have been thinking about them in relation to a discursive practice. Writing is central to what I do and to how I interact with my peers and I wanted that to be present in the *MATRIX* project. I asked other people to define the words that I've been working with, writing in pairs, giving them no restrictions at all. It moves the discussion from the extreme interiority of being obsessed with certain words for long amounts of time to an extreme exteriority where the definition of those words and their potential impact are defined by different people, so it's all about relationships and those associations. When I make images with words it becomes a very different process so I wanted to throw it back into the discursive.

ET: This exercise of defining, and the way you talk about movement, which is either a social/political movement or through the body, are largely representational ideas and yet your interest is about pushing forward those ideas through a vocabulary of abstraction. You referenced this earlier, and I find that interesting but don't entirely understand the relation.

ER: I'm interested in the way improvisation challenges abstraction. You don't ever really know what you are going to get with the way that I work in terms of asking people to collaborate and working with conceptual frames for ideas and questions. Interacting around that can result in an abstract or nonrepresentational image even if it didn't start there.

ET: I think this notion for you that abstraction doesn't start as abstraction counters certain ideas about the possibility for absence of reference, or some formal purity.

ER: I'm aware of that. It doesn't start from that drive or that removal; I think of it more as a process, not a condensation.

I think what's walked me closer to abstraction is the way that in the last few years I've been thinking about the impossible and the imaginary. It's also the way that I've developed this vocabulary of gestures and movements because a lot of the images that I see and want to make are not physically possible, or at least within the kind of production and collaboration I'm interested in. I constantly pull back and think about things in their larger context and broader terms. It's part of being a writer and an organizer, which isn't abstract at all, but is about relationships and building new contexts.



Emily Roysdon's exhibitions include 2010 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Mixed Use Manhattan at the Reina Sofia in Madrid; Manifesta 8 in Murcia, Spain; Bucharest Biennial; Greater New York at MOMA PS1, New York; and The Generational: Younger Than Jesus at the New Museum, New York. Most recently Roysdon had a solo exhibition at Konsthall C in Stockholm and was commissioned by the New York Art Book Fair to publish *West Street*. She is also in the band *MEN* and was editor and co-founder of the influential queer feminist journal and artist collective *LTTR*. In 2010 Roysdon received a Rema Hort Mann Foundation Award.

The production of Emily Roysdon's *MATRIX* commission was facilitated by the UC Berkeley Department of Art Practice. Special thanks to Jane Anderson, Melissa Anderson, Barney Bailey and the BAM/PFA crew, Dena Beard, Tamar Beja and the UC Berkeley Print Making Studio, Karen Bennett, Gray Brechin, Leopoldine Core, Silvana DePaula, Michelle Dizon, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, Nicole Eisenman, Francesco Gagliardi, Andrea Geyer, Tirza True Latimer, Isla Leaver-Yap, Nathan Lee, The Lulls, Mariana Marroquin, Chris Moukarbel, MPA, Eileen Myles, Jeanine Oleson, Camilo Ontiveros, Adrienne Skye Roberts, SM Studio, A.L. Steiner, Dave Taylor, Dillon Thomas and the UC Berkeley Digital Media Lab Consortium, Wu Tsang, Zhivka Valiavicharska, Chris Vargas, Brett Walker, Anne Walsh, Amy Watson and 1984 Printing, Craig Willse, and Matt Wolf.

The *MATRIX* Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; and the continued support of the BAM/PFA Trustees.

BAM/PFA BAM/PFA GALLERIES 2626 BANCROFT WAY, BERKELEY, CA
(510) 642-0808 | bampfa.berkeley.edu | facebook.com/bampfa

