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## A(void) is Built

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# ***A(void) is Built***

Taylor Hayes

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art

Lesley Art + Design

June 2019

## **Abstract**

My thesis project dissects the carefully designed structure and political nature of public and private spaces through the physical manipulation and redaction of architectural and design magazines. Utilizing the process of collage and décollage, the work (re)presents visual cues of interiors, architectural passageways, and empty spaces as manipulated and defamiliarized structures. Margins and negative spaces are illuminated to reveal unpredictability, fragility, uncertainty, and the absence of truth. Here, space is far from passive – instead space is constantly in the process of being constructed. Through this work, I question how architecture is intentionally designed for the white wealthy and consequently designed to keep others out. Additionally, I explore the way in which we are conditioned to learn our place and to navigate space in society.

## **Introduction**

Growing up in southwest Virginia as the oldest child of a single mother, my family operated as a low-income household. Due to financial and emotional instability, we were habitually displaced and learned to navigate temporary and uncertain spaces. Early in my education, I was marked as a student for advanced-track learning and bussed to schools farther from my neighborhood and even farther from what was familiar to me. Through this process of estrangement,

I learned alongside children from families that were very different from my own and was confronted with the cultural norms of a middle class lifestyle.

Throughout my life, I have learned to operate between spaces – lower class home versus middle class school, service-industry jobs versus privileged college classes, social norms of homosexuality versus heterosexuality. I am in tune with my ability to blend in and go unnoticed while at the same time feeling like an outsider.

My family was unable to buy superfluous items, but a low-cost object that I could find, and a material that subsequently held great value for me, were magazines. I cut apart and collaged photos and words from the pages and decorated my room, filled up my sketchbooks, and created my school projects. The process of reading, cutting, and collaging the pages served as a substitute for my direct material consumption of the spaces and commodities I read about in those pages.



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*Taylor Hayes | From the series A[void]: A Middle Class Fortress in Which to Hide, (2019)*

My investigation of architectural spaces, shadows, and negative space began as a child and culminated in my work at Lesley Art + Design. My thesis work is comprised of two, symbiotic bodies of work – symbiotic in their making process as well as their visual display. The first is a wall-mounted, sculptural collage made from dissected architecture and design magazine pages. The pages are unreadable due to the fact that all of the words, images, and page numbers have been removed. The second body of work is a series of collages created from those same magazine pages with content still intact. These pages are layered on top of each other to create interior scenes that have familiar architectural cues, but due to slight repositioning, they no longer make logical or cultural sense.

## **Architecture, Space, & Ideology**

Recognizing my obsession with architectural design, I researched housing policies in America to learn more about the history and design of communities throughout the United States. In the book *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood*, Peter Moskowitz argues that the United States has a long history of “dispossessing the poor of adequate housing” through “explicitly racist planning and housing policy” (Moskowitz). Even though cities may appear chaotic, “the location, design, and make-up of their neighborhoods are the result of careful planning” (Moskowitz).

Up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, property ownership was primarily controlled by wealthy white men, but after the Great Depression, policies were put in place to reform the American economy. Through the creation of the Home Owners Loan Association and the Federal Housing Administration, reforms were made to make loans readily available to American families which created a demand for housing and community development that had never been seen before, loans that were denied to black families because of redlining (Moskowitz). With subsidizations of infrastructure and automobiles, the idea of the suburb was constructed, however, people of color were marginalized by this process of white flight from city centers and systemically written out of the fantasy of the American dream.

Today, the same dynamic is playing out as white people are being subsidized to reinhabit cities while black families are “ignored or even forcibly pushed out” – a process more commonly known as gentrification (Moskowitz). Moskowitz adds that:

Gentrification wasn't about some ethereal change in neighborhood character. It was about mass evictions, about violence, about the decimation of decades-old cultures. But the reporting... on gentrification focused on the new things happening in these neighborhoods: the high end pizza joints and coffee shops, the hipsters, the fashion trends. In some ways that made sense, it's hard to report on a void. On something that's now missing. It's much easier to report on the new than on the displaced.

But... that's what gentrification is: a void in a neighborhood, in a city, in a culture (Moskowitz).

In the collage, *The Facade Degrades: A[void] is Being Built*, the architectural form originates from a structured and systematic grid. Fragmented and disorienting, the space created is unattainable as the viewer can only access the structure from the outside, as if on the edge or exterior. Through the process of redacting the words and images from the magazine pages, the original ideological content is unrecognizable. The viewer is confronted with a facade of blank margins and empty spaces from which the material must be (re)read, meanwhile a new value system is created as the luxurious and lusty images fall away to reveal plain, white paper. The excised pages create strange windows and viewfinders into this loosely-created and fragile space, juxtaposing what is solid and void, what is dimensional and flat.



Taylor Hayes | *The Facade Degrades: A[void] is Being Built*, (2019)

The facade of the paper architecture is overwhelmingly homogenous and the shadow cast from the material fights for attention. Although built from the negative space in magazines, the structure generates a positive image on the wall in the form of a shadow. At first, the shadow reads only as a by-product, but upon further looking, the shadow creates a language or a subtext to inform and complicate the piece as a whole. A void is constructed – architectural space made out of emptiness, out of flatness, out of nothing. Although architectural, the two-dimensional magazine material remains flat and therefore the dream world it represents operates similarly – as a flattened, unrealized space.

In the collage series, *A[void]: A Middle Class Fortress in Which to Hide*, the viewer is confronted with an insider or interior view of the same magazine material. The viewer must navigate their gaze through a defamiliarized room – a domestic interior acting as a microcosm for navigating space in society. In these collages, some of the ideological content is still intact, but repositioned and altered so that the images no longer make sense. Luxury symbols preside and sharp angles protrude, but the negative space edges in to redact hallways and doorframes so that there is no longer a visible way to escape. The voyeuristic quality of the work is altered as the viewer's story becomes entangled within the piece—the viewer cannot simply consume or view the work, but must start to consider what the piece is made of and why it is made that way. Ultimately, neither works can exist without the other and thus a structure of power exists



between them. By viewing the works together, the exterior and interior of a fragile and temporary space is constructed.



Taylor Hayes | From the series *A[void]: A Middle Class Fortress in Which to Hide*, (2019)

## Collage: a History of Fragmentation and Consumerism

In collage and assemblage, the importance of the found object or everyday material holds meaning in the work: "emphasizing concept and process over end product" and putting "the incongruous into meaningful congress with the ordinary" (Guggenheim). Richard Banash, author of *Collage Culture: Readymades, Meaning, the Age of Consumption* states that, "in the 20th century, collage techniques are seen as one of the ultimate marks of being avant-garde... because they mirror the new modes of mass production and consumer culture"

(Banash). These fragments from the real world question the separation between art and life, the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, as well as the distinction between high and low culture. Magazines exist as objects created for a specific, intended audience that can consume and digest transient information and moments of pop culture.

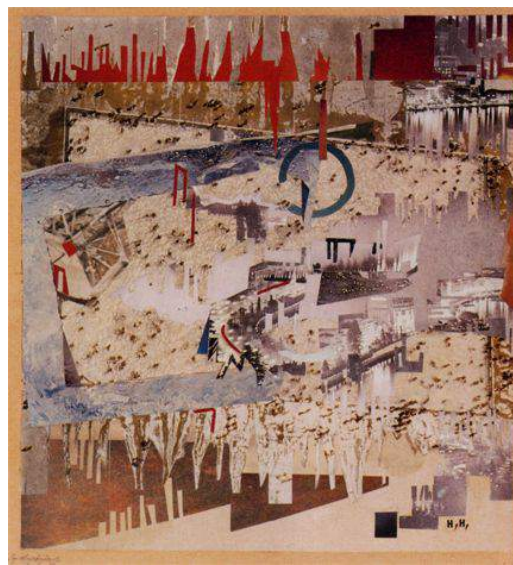
The fragmented history of collage is closely linked to the ecology of my studio practice. German Dada artist, Kurt Schwitters, is “known for his abstract collages which he began to make in 1918 using found and everyday objects such as labels, bus tickets, fabric and broken wood” (Kurt Schwitters). These works were born out of post-war feelings that everything had been broken down and new things had to be reconstructed out of the fragments. By elevating discarded materials to the level of fine art, Schwitters is thought to have inspired post-war art movements such as Pop Art, Conceptual Art, and Installation Art.

Artist Hannah Höch thrived during the Dada movement in Germany and was known to be a pioneer of political collages and photomontages. Höch “astutely spliced together photographs or photographic reproductions she cut from popular magazines, illustrated journals, and fashion publications,” recontextualizing them in a dynamic and layered style (Hannah Höch). Höch’s “combinations of fragments of widely circulated images connected her work to the world” and expanded the notion of what could be considered fine art by employing pieces of popular culture (Hannah Höch).



Hannah Höch | *Modenschau (Fashion Show)*, 1925-35

In *Industrial Landscape*, Höch began to take a new approach to her appropriated materials by transforming her newspaper and magazine cuttings so that they no longer referenced their original context and started to take on abstract and unfamiliar forms. In this work, she co-mingled images of a crowded swimming pool and its surrounding landscape to create a new image full of machinery and industrial factories. The fragments are transformed into an abstracted, modern city.



Hannah Höch | *Industrial Landscape*, (1967) | Collection Landesbank Berlin

Banash argues that “collage has the power to be critical of ideology at the level of its content, but at the level of its form, it depends on the materials of consumer culture and quite literally re-enacts the exact processes of mass production and consumption” (Banash). Therefore, “collage can be critical within consumer culture but it can never get outside it or figure some alternative world beyond it” (Banash). My thesis work intends to challenge this concept from Banash by breaking down the collage material and flattening space to create a new, alternative space that does not exist. In this work I seek to use the techniques employed by Höch and take the material substance beyond its original form.

Martha Rosler is an influential artist making politically critical art since before the Vietnam War, xeroxing her photomontages and passing them out at protests as part of the anti-war effort. *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* is a series of 20 photomontages conceived in the 1960s and 70s during a time of increased United States military presence in Vietnam (Martha Rosler). Rosler combined pictures of Vietnamese war victims from *LIFE* magazine with images of the homes of upper-class Americans published in *House Beautiful* to create a realized representation of what Americans referred to as the living-room war (Martha Rosler). The photomontages are actually color photographs of the originals, distancing the handmade far from the concept of the work. Rosler breaks down the here and there of war and her “activist photomontages reveal the extent to which the collective experience of war can be shaped by images” (Art

Basel). Rosler's work was created during the war and disseminated in underground newspapers and on flyers. This approach was used as Rosler's frustration with images and rhetoric depicted in the media.



Martha Rosler | From the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, (1960-70)

Contemporary artists continue to use the medium of collage in new and innovative ways, pulling imagery from both the Internet and analog sources (Wallach). As changing technology and forms of mass-production have changed, Richard Banash comments that “the mark of the cutting edge in art is the digital, the virtual copy, and collage now seems to... gesture towards a more emphatically or differently embodied past” (Banash). Beyond content and technique, collage

“carries with it a spirit of art-making that is inclusive, accessible, radical, hybridized and ever-evolving” (Frank).

## **Materiality, the Body, and Social Abstraction**

Abstract art has traditionally been a genre that refutes or denies political expression, but artists Mark Bradford and Tomashi Jackson implement what Bradford calls “social abstraction” — not abstraction that is inward looking but “abstraction that [looks] out at the social and political landscape” (Tomkins, Jenkins). By giving value to materials of everyday life in the city and employing the formalist and intuitive nature of abstraction, Bradford and Jackson present a complex visual representation of race and socioeconomics for people of color in the United States.

Born and raised in South Los Angeles, Mark Bradford grew up with a single mother who owned a beauty salon in an all-black neighborhood until he was 11, when they moved to an all-white neighborhood. From early on, Bradford used the materials found around the salon such as the paper rectangles used for permanents, bobby pins, and hair dyes, later scavenging neighborhood ad posters to use as paper pulp — effectively engaging discarded fragments of urban life (The Broad). While collecting materials, Bradford thinks “about all the white noise out there in the streets: all the beepers and blaring culture—cell phones, amps, chromed-out wheels, and synthesizers... which act as memory of things



pasted and things past. You can peel away the layers of papers and it's like reading the streets through signs" (The Broad).

Bradford's mixed media painting, *Scorched Earth*, was created after researching the Tulsa race riot of 1921—one of the wealthiest black communities in the United States that was burnt to the ground after a white mob started attacking African-American residents and businesses. The painting is made from billboard paper, photomechanical reproductions, acrylic gel medium, carbon paper, acrylic paint, and bleach on canvas to “resemble an aerial map of a location that has been blacked out, a topography of ruins” (The Broad). The Broad gallery which houses the painting adds that “the blackness of this land mass resonates on many levels: black as in the demographics of this neighborhood in Tulsa, Oklahoma... black, as the title suggests, meaning burnt or scorched; black as in redacted; and black as in nothingness” (The Broad).



Mark Bradford | *Scorched Earth*, (2006) | The Broad

Like Bradford, my studio choices evolved out of the materials that were in proximity to me growing up in southwest Virginia. I seek to utilize the noise of the magazine pages and all of their ideological constructs to question who the magazine is created for, and who it is not created for. Additionally, who is allowed access to idealize and occupy such the spaces printed in these publications, and who is left out? In the collage *The Facade Degrades: A[void] is Being Built*, a visual structure of the gaps in the destabilized material is left behind so what is unsaid or what is left out of the original pages becomes most important. Deconstructing and reconstructing magazine pages removes the original material from its particular timeframe where the subtext can be exposed. The layers of empty frames and white space merge together, collapsing the ideology of this domain into a (re)flattened, homogenous construct.



Taylor Hayes | *The Facade Degrades: A[void] is Being Built*, (2019)



New York City based artist Tomashi Jackson studied painting and printmaking at Yale University and during that time she noticed that “the language Josef Albers used in his instructional text *Interaction of Color* mirrored the rhetoric of racialized segregation found in the transcripts of education policy and civil rights court cases fought by Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund” (Puleo). As a result, Jackson started to use the properties of color perception as “a tool for investigating the history of school desegregation in the United States and the contemporary resegregation of public space and violence against the black body” (Puleo).



Tomashi Jackson | *The School House Rock (Brown, et. al. v Board of Education of Topeka)*  
*(Bolling v Sharpe (District of Columbia))* | Jack Tilton Gallery

Provocative titles, such as “The School House Rock (Brown, et. al. v Board of Education of Topeka) (Bolling v Sharpe (District of Columbia))” reference landmark court cases which addressed civil rights and racial segregation, Jackson evokes the socio-political history of protest and struggle on the part of black people in the United States (Puleo). Color perception is not static but instead “is relative and that how a viewer perceives color is determined by the color nearest to it”—concepts that Jackson employs in her work through the placement of different colors, textures, and materials (Puleo). Jackson combines painting with sculpture, textile, embroidery, printmaking, and photography thoughtful media to comment on the “materiality of resources and how value is created” (Puleo).

The body is always present in Jackson’s work— implications of bodies and the law come together through the employment of painted and collaged gauze, a translucent material most often used for repairing injured flesh. In *The Facade Degrades: A[void] is Being Built*, there are no human figures present however the hand is referenced through the undulating forms created from individual, labored marks. The act of cutting and displacing the content is a visceral, even violent act. In contrast, the materiality of the paper is translucent and fragile—the piece responds to the viewer’s body when walking up to approach the work, as if moved by a subtle breeze. The value of every day, discarded material is critically important to tell the story of a contemporary time

and place, adding complexity to the work that is abstracted through additive and subtractive processes.



Taylor Hayes | *The Facade Degrades: A[void] is Being Built*, (2019)

## Negative Space, Absence, and the Void

Throughout my artistic practice, I have had an acute eye for emphasizing negative space—the space that surrounds an object or image. Just as important as positive space, I think of negative space as a tool to define the boundaries of an object. Although positive space, *the content*, is usually the focus of an artwork, negative space, *the context*, provides essential information to understanding the work more clearly. Contemporary artists Rachel Whiteread, Elizabeth Alexander, and Jill Sylvia emphasize negative space in their sculptural works by dissecting the negative space from the positive space and insisting upon a recontextualization of the content presented in their work. By employing or casting everyday objects, these women artists elevate ordinary themes of domestic

and architectural space and the value of labor to reveal previously intangible experiences of everyday life.

This contemporary practice of dissecting, removing, and cutting away before reassembling, reorienting, and recontextualizing is parallel to my process of collage. In my work, negative space is the key tool to creating and understanding the work. When taking away the content, the work is forced to say more through context – a minimalist approach that stands out in a world full of noise and overstimulation. By stripping down materials to their essential form, and emphasizing the negative, a shift occurs for the viewer which sparks a new dialog around everyday life and materials, which have not traditionally been deemed worthy of representation in fine art. The deliberate and obsessive arrangements evoke a taxonomic system or a new language that the viewer must interpret to fully engage with the work.



Taylor Hayes | From the series *A[void]: A Middle Class Fortress in Which to Hide* (2019)

London sculptor, Rachel Whiteread uses industrial materials such as plaster, concrete, resin, rubber, and metal to cast negative space—the space inside everyday objects, domestic interiors, and public spaces (National Gallery of Art). Whiteread’s sculptures range in scale from the monumental to the intimate, effectively memorializing the everyday and making voids visible. Whiteread has “a reputation as the world’s leading sculptor of space, an artist who explores the ghostly gaps between objects and conjures an absence into a substance” (Brooks). She is known “for making solid casts of the open space in and around pieces of furniture such as tables and chairs, architectural details and even entire rooms and buildings” (Brooks).

In her 1990 sculpture, “Ghost”, Whiteread creates a positive from a negative, making a plaster cast of the interior "void" of an entire room in a Victorian home (National Gallery of Art). The room measures 9 feet wide, 11 1/2 feet high and 10 feet deep—a previously empty space that is now contained and trapped in solid form. The surface shows signs of having been lived in and abandoned, “a fossilized tomb of what once was” (Kennicott). By casting the space inside of the room instead of the objects themselves, Whiteread casts the context of the lives once lived, lost, and the memories inside.



Rachel Whiteread | *Ghost*, (1990) | National Gallery of Art

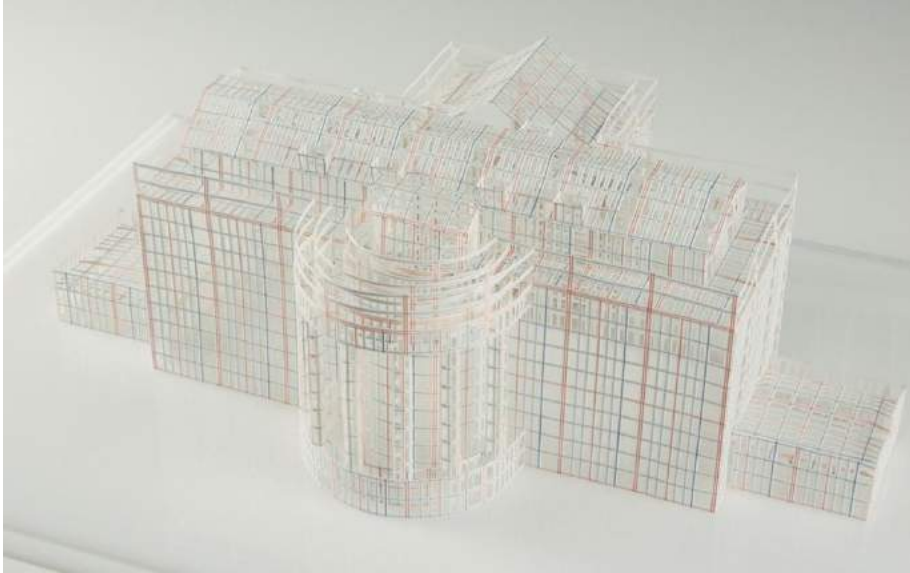
Sculptor, Elizabeth Alexander creates immersive installations by painstakingly cutting and rearranging rolls of antique wallpaper to explore symbols of femininity, domesticity, and class. Alexander refers to herself as a domestic archeologist, using found objects to “collaborate with [the object’s] history” and “[access] the language people use to decorate themselves or surroundings” (Alexander). In her 2018 installation, “Crumbs Under My Pillow,” Alexander laboriously cuts away the positive space, the flowers, from fabric and wallpaper and reconstructs them into a large-scale installation. This sculptural work transforms the signs of status and cultural relics by “removing the content from its context” in order to “create a subverted relationship of positive/negative, and figure/ground” (Woodard).



Elizabeth Alexander | *Crumbs Under my Pillow*, (2018) | Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art

Paper artist, Jill Sylvia uses ledger paper to construct scale models of American centres of power. Sylvia meticulously cuts out the negative spaces between the grids of the ledger paper, systematically subtracting elements, and transforming the surface into a new, latticed language. This material language repeats throughout her art and represents the very material used to account for centres of money and capitalism. In her 2007 sculpture, “Untitled (White House),” Sylvia uses gridded structures to comment on the systems concealed within the architecture, as well as creating a contrast between solid and void. Sylvia adds that “the skeletal pages drape and accumulate, demarcate the time cost for their creation, and become the buildings for which they have laid the

groundwork. Grids are reconstructed using the excised boxes in order to create a new sense, a new value” (Eleanor Hardwood Gallery).

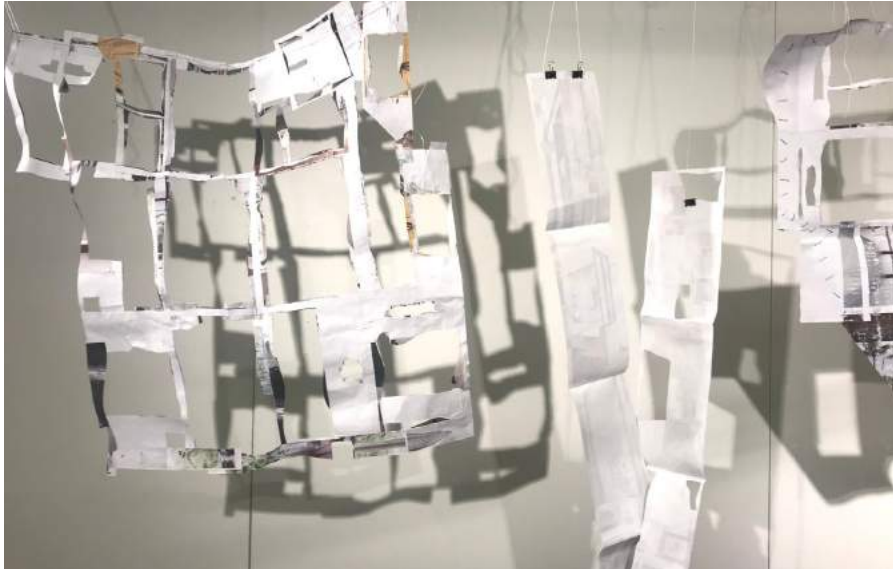


Jill Sylvia | *Untitled (White House)*, (2007) | Eleanor Hardwood Gallery

Although presented in varying scale and media, all three of these contemporary artists thoughtfully employ materials to create a new language. By removing the content, *the positive space*, these artists force a conversation to be had around a new content, the once purely contextual *negative space*. There is a sense of loss or memory formed around the object that no longer exists, and at the same time there is a feeling of birth as an entirely new object is constructed. The objects these artists intend to dissect are still represented through context clues and abstract form, however the viewer must reorient their previous knowledge of the context that surrounds this once familiar, everyday object.



## Activating Space and Casting Shadow



Taylor Hayes | *Study: The Facade Degrades* (2018)

Shadows, for me, have always been accompanied by an attraction to the world of the indeterminate—forms and fantasies that are constantly in flux and only exist under the certain circumstances. Shadows can be described as a dark form produced by an object coming between rays of light and a surface. In my work, shadows take on a primary role to both define the boundaries of a piece and to activate the surrounding space. The unpacking and dismantling of architectural and design magazines led me to investigate the ideology of those spaces as well as to challenge myself to create a new space out of the remnants. My curiosity with cast shadow led me to explore the work of artists Cornelia Parker and Sheila Pepe, who have an intense relationship with light, shadow, and the role they play in activating space.

English installation artist, Cornelia Parker, is best known for her installation *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*; the restored contents of a garden shed exploded by the British Army at the request of the artist. The surviving pieces were used by Parker to create “an installation suspended from the ceiling as if held mid-explosion” and “lit by a single light bulb, the fragments cast dramatic shadows on the gallery’s walls” (Tate). The installation “works against traditional ideas of sculpture”; whereas traditional sculpture is concerned with something solid, Parker is fascinated by fragmentation and materials in a state of flux (Tate). The viewer can walk around and look through the work, discovering each individual piece and the space in between objects (Tate). The shed serves as symbol for the mundanity of everyday life as well as a place of refuge or escape, but “by blowing it up, [Parker] is taking away the safe place, the place of secrets and fantasy, the place where a personal history of objects no longer in use – but not quite finished with – is stored. But she is also, in the process of creating an ‘exploded view’, perhaps creating a new space” (Tate).



Cornelia Parker | *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* | Tate Modern

Brooklyn sculptor and installation artist, Sheila Pepe, utilizes domestic and industrial fibers to investigate craft traditions associated with women and to oppose patriarchal notions of fine art making. Many of Pepe's fiber works respond to architectural spaces, adding a layer of awareness about the museum as an institution and the context of its ideology. Ultimately, recognition of success for artists and curators is based around the context of the museum, its supporters, and donors. Pepe constructs "playful arrangements of ropes, shoelaces, chainmail, knit and crocheted yarn" which "read like a constellation pulled from inside the guts of the building—the colorful coordinates that we would find coughed up from inside all the hard-edged geometry of our docile structures" (Hawley). These sculptures interact with and improvise with the architectural plan of the building,

it's all about “the sag, the push, the pull, the pressure put on the building” to sometimes emphasize and otherwise mask structural features (Hawley).



Sheila Pepe | *Hot Mess Formalism* (2018-19) | deCordova Sculpture Park & Museum

## Conclusion

Commonalities connect my studio practice with the works of the artists presented in this thesis—to employ the remnants of everyday life as well as non-high art materials. These fragments from the real world question the separation between art and life, the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, as well as the distinction between high and low culture. All of the works are created by breaking down ordinary material to build it back up again or as Mark Bradford describes: “Décollage: I take it away; collage: I immediately add it right back. It’s almost like a rhythm. I’m a builder and a demolisher. I put up so I can tear down”

(Art21). Although proof of the body is scarcely evident in these works, the body of the viewer is an effective tool for navigating and activating the spaces created, whether in two-dimensional or three-dimensional form. Margins and negative spaces are illuminated to reveal unpredictability, fragility, uncertainty, and the absence of truth. Here, space is far from passive – instead space is constantly in the process of being constructed.

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