

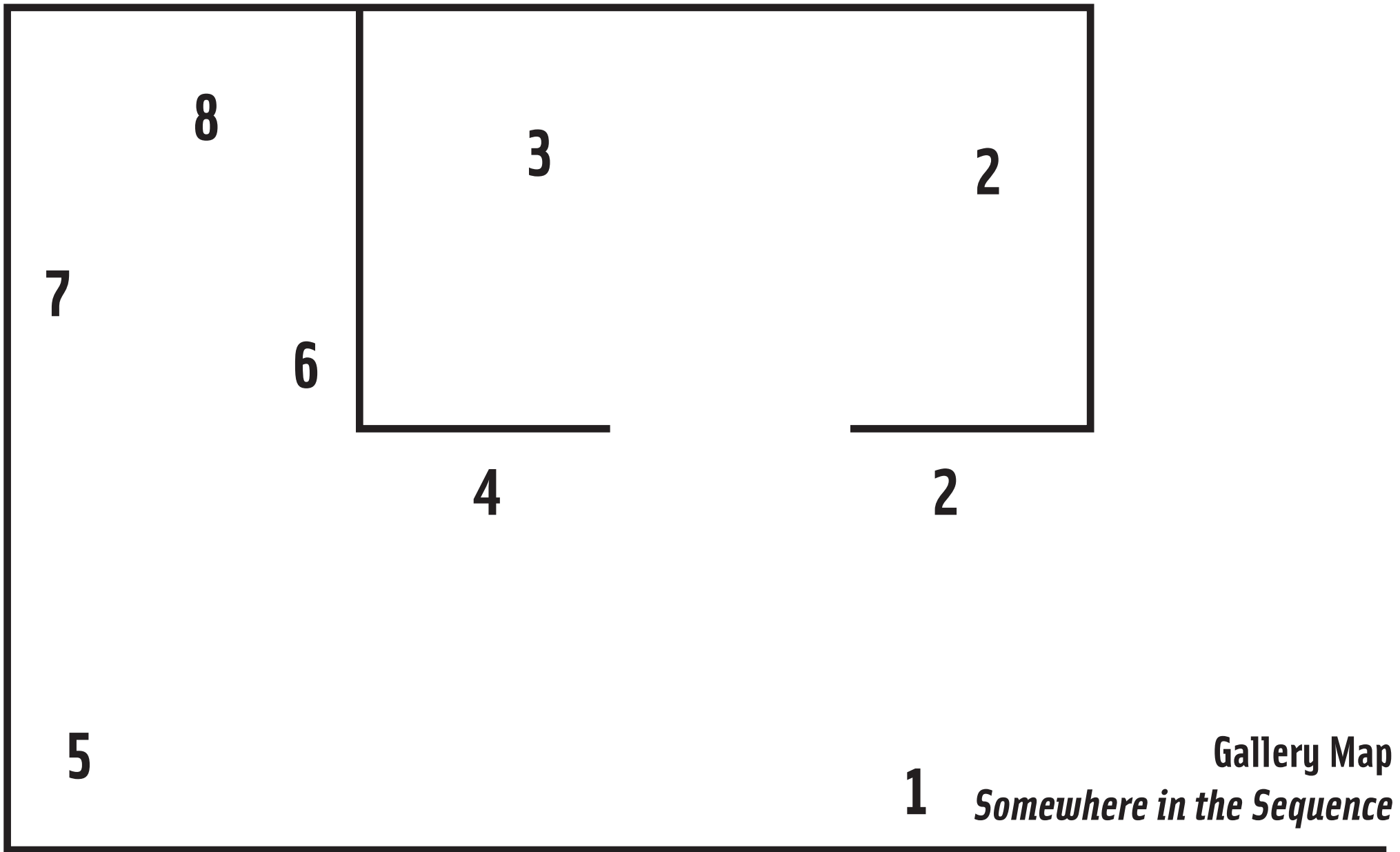


Somewhere in the Sequence

October 17 2019 - January 5, 2020

Artist conversation Saturday, November 23 2:30 PM

Curated by David Borawski



1: Alyssa Freitas: *Info Bubble*, video 02:31, 2019

2: Debbie Hesse: *SWAY.SHIFT. Another Asterism*, installation of six unique wall constructions, 2019

3: Matt Neckers: *Self-Guided Missile*, mixed media, 2019

4: Monique Atherton: *Installation with photographs*, 2019

5: Katie Bullock: *Meanwhile, My Life Was Under a Cloud*, installation, 2019

6: Fafnir Adamites: *Orientation Cues*, used t-shirts and cotton string, 2019

7: Soo Sunny Park: *Diffraction*, mixed media on paper and acetate with aluminium screen, 2010

8: Soo Sunny Park: *Transitive Testing Ground*, drywall, metal stud, graphite, and wood, 2008

Somewhere in the Sequence

"To understand the causal sequence of events and to find somewhere in the sequence one's own place, that is the first duty of a revolutionary"

Leon Trotsky

We emerge into this world with a slap on the ass, a deep gulp of air and a howl of protest. It takes years before we consider that there was a time when we did not exist. As family members and public figures die and their names appear less frequently in the general discourse it slowly dawns on us that there is a time when we too will cease to exist. The curse of being human is the recognition of our transience. It is said that this awareness is what distinguishes us from other living beings. Whether or not we are truly alone in this knowledge does not matter, because knowing it fosters the appreciation that now, this time, is our time.

Commentators and pundits like to announce that our present is a unique time in history. It is as if they have embraced the notion that history repeats itself, usually,

but that our historical moment has stepped out from its cyclical nature to confront us with an entirely unprecedented situation. Every four years, when we are in the midst of a presidential contest, the experts assert with certainty that this election is a change election or that we are in a period of transition. This has become so predictable that one may wonder if history does

not indeed repeat itself, or at least the language with which we characterize history. After all, the conventional wisdom is that the only constant is change. When are we not in transition?

The challenges that confront humankind are not always the same, though sometimes they are similar. In the waning decades of the tenth century Christian Europe fell to its knees in prayer at the threat of the oncoming millennial year 1000. It was widely

believed that the millennium signaled the onset of the apocalypse and the second coming of the Messiah. In the 1950s the young baby boomers were schooled in an atmosphere of anxiety over the possibility of nuclear war. H-bomb drills joined fire drills as a part of general safety precautions. At the sound of an alarm students would duck and cover, hide beneath their desks and cover their heads with their hands. This wasn't going to accomplish much, but in that position it made it easier to kiss one's ass goodbye. There are still to this day individuals in their late sixties and early seventies who are sensitive about being seated near windows for fear of being maimed by flying glass caused by an immanent atomic explosion.

Every few years apocalyptic notions are revived by groups of true believers who, informed by the Mayan calendar, the prophesies of Nostradamus, or messages from outer space, sell off their worldly goods and ready themselves for the rapture, alien abduction or some other quick, spectacular exit. So far humankind has managed to avoid such catastrophe, though not because we have met and surmounted the challenge or took action to evade the oncoming inevitability. No, so far the threats have been more exaggerated than real, less likely than advertised, and we have just been lucky.

We can only hope that our luck holds as scientists and much of the rest of the world's population contemplates the risks of climate change. Levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide are at historically high levels. The Siberian tundra, in the past frozen year round, has thawed to a depth of four feet, sending more carbon dioxide and methane to join the cow farts and automobile exhaust in degrading the atmosphere. Planetary temperature rise is at 1.62 degrees Fahrenheit above levels in the 19th century. The earth's ocean temperatures are up .4 degrees Fahrenheit since 1969. At this time the odds do not look good.

Global warming will alter many of the mechanisms that have contributed to the possibility of a reasonably comfortable life for Earth's 7 billion inhabitants. When temperate zones and climatic conditions shift our ability to feed those billions will likely be compromised. Some regions may become uninhabitable. Famine and migration could produce pressures that provoke some peoples, nations or unaligned ideological groups to declared war in order to provide food and shelter. The *Doomsday Clock*, presently at two minutes before midnight, could tick its way to twelve o'clock as governments, running out of options, become desperate.

The apocalyptic is not the only threat we face. In the words of Will K. Wilkins, Executive Director of Real Art Ways;

"We are experiencing a historic period that includes unprecedented political leadership in Washington, a polarized electorate, social media both connecting and separating people, traditional media the focus of constant presidential criticism, and questions of



manipulation of the political process coursing through public discourse. This moment is bringing to the fore issues that touch on ideas of community, resistance, engagement and creative expression."¹

Social media, while permitting and encouraging more communication than ever before, also erodes the sense of privacy enjoyed by the individual. The most minute, trivial detail shared by the user is channeled back through algorithms to bombard that individual with commercial, social and political messages, some benign, others more subversive and some frankly invasive. Fact and informed opinion become confused with pernicious propaganda and trust becomes nearly extinct. The division of the *body politic* has produced a virtual Cold Civil War in our country as the very notion of civility crumbles. Around the world the general esteem in which democracy is held is deteriorating. Unity of purpose, a scarce commodity at the best of times, is ever more rare, generally appearing only on the fringes of the social fabric where it is well positioned to do the most mischief. It's almost enough to induce paralysis.

But the show must go on, and as if in response to the playground bully's insolent taunt, "So what are you going to do about it?," the work of Fafnir Adamites, Monique Atherton, Katie Bullock, Alyssa Freitas, Debbie Hesse, Matt Neckers, and Soo Sunny Park, assembled by curator David Borawski, offers a number of possibilities as to what we might focus on while we await the oncoming calamity.

Fafnir Adamites incorporates craft procedures in work whose foundation looks inward and sometimes backward. They are intrigued by the idea that the psychological conditions of one generation are embedded in their DNA and are then transmitted to subsequent generations. It is widely accepted that mental health issues like anxiety and depression have a genetic link that produces a succession of individuals suffering the same kinds of anguish. This parade of stress stretching out over the years and decades is paralleled in Adamites fabric work as one woven section after another advances down and across their wall-mounted pieces. By repeating patterns in their work Adamites does not dwell on questions of "why?," but, instead, takes action in the present. As if in response to words attributed to Socrates, "To be is to do," or Jean-Paul Sartre, "To do is to be.," they commit themselves to creating a tangible record of their physical actions. From the existentialist point of view it is our actions and not some metaphysical legacy that defines our presence and our meaning. Adamities themselves describes their practice as Sisyphean. In his essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus", Albert Camus describes Sisyphus, who was sent to the underworld and punished by having to roll a rock up a steep hill only to have it roll back down upon reaching the summit, as "the ideal absurd hero and that his punishment is representative of the human condition: Sisyphus must struggle

perpetually and without hope of success. So long as he accepts that there is nothing more to life than this absurd struggle, then he can find happiness in it."² Camus identifies four types of individual approaches to the absurd, the seducer, the actor, the rebel and finally the artist who "does not try to explain experience, but simply describes it. It presents a certain worldview that deals with particular matters rather than aiming for universal themes."³

Monique Atherton turns to an exploration of personal relationships in her work. Here an existentialist thread continues in an exploration of intimate connections with other people. From an existentialist vantage point it is this, rather than an inherited spiritual essence, that creates a meaningful existence. Atherton looks at and beneath the surface to see how the private, interior person forges relationships in the public sphere. There is much to overcome in the effort spent navigating the obstacles between public and private and the effort to do so colors the resulting alliances.



Atherton's work, which is constructed from a photographic perspective, displays images of people who have intersected with her own life. While many of her pieces involve her image these are not self-portraits in the conventional manner, but avatars of the public agent who is in the process of making connections. She is much like a chess piece, traveling around the chessboard in its search of other chess pieces. In the current exhibition only the others (and partial, fragmented others at that), not Atherton herself, are pictured. They are transmitters and receivers of desire for human interaction. In this light perhaps the most poignant image is that of the two hands being held out in front of an unseen individual. The gesture speaks of vast wellsprings of desire, though for what, physical, psychological or spiritual sustenance remains uncertain.⁴

Katie Bullock's work captures environmental and astronomical moments of the day in a delicate, diary-like form. She is an observer of details experienced broadly but

¹ From a letter to Artist's Resource Trust (A.R.T.) Fund, a fund of Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation

² <https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/sisyphus/summary/>

³ <https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/sisyphus/summary/>

⁴ Monique Atherton, from correspondence with the author

appreciated rarely. Recording on fragile, semi-opaque pieces of paper, in a tiny script that defies credulity, she records the weather conditions, the characteristics of the sky and mechanics of planetary motion with respect to their effects on weather. Individual pieces draw attention to particular aspects of the environment, such as those that recommend that the viewer look at the sky several times a day, building a greater, more in-depth awareness of the moment. The way in which Bullock's direction of our attention to the sensual aspects of the atmosphere reminds some of Monet's *Haystack* paintings that record subtle variations in light over the course of a day. And any consideration of climate and weather is sufficient to remind us of the danger we face in regards to human-made climate change.

The small scale of Bullock's work and her strategy of deploying it, in this particular instance, along a line stretched between two walls of the gallery, encourages the viewer to expend the effort in the gallery that the works themselves suggest the viewer invest in the out of doors. In this way she funnels the macrocosmic through the nearly microcosmic.⁵

Alyssa Freitas' video, *Info Bubble* takes on the current political climate in direct fashion, both lamenting its character and her own emotional response to it. On an intense blue background are vaguely discernable portions of an arm, head and torso. Topping this off and framing the head is a brilliant cascade of vivid red hair. The warm/cool contrast becomes metaphorical as text scrolls down from the top of the image. The first line of text introduces segregation as an issue and the clearly defined red and blue areas start to refer to the separation of one group of people from another. The high chromatic contrast initially leads to the assumption that color, hence race or ethnicity, is the subject. But insofar as the red and blue are so decidedly artificial they soon morph into signifiers of any kind of difference be it race, belief, sexuality, gender or any other set of distinctions that can be exaggerated for discriminatory purposes.

More texts scroll downward indicating that these discriminatory attitudes are reinforced by a similar separation and isolation of opinion. People confronted with controversial issues often, and at their peril, seek the comfort of others espousing those same attitudes and thus do not preform any self-critique by exposing themselves to and considering other points of view. This leads inevitably to a reiteration and buttressing of division. Freitas work has a remarkable emotional impact for a piece that depends so heavily on detached, formal means.

The work of **Debbie Hesse** has the visceral impact of a deep-sea video. Bright colors, shifting forms, and a rich layering of transparencies, opaque planes, shadows, colored

projections and reflective surfaces result in wall-mounted pieces that offer a remarkably kinetic experience. The shapes she employs, cut from acrylic and other planar materials, are usually organic and vegetal. Some of the shapes have a decorative quality that would seem right at home in Henri Matisse's late, cut paper productions.

It would be easy to understand Hesse's work strictly through its decorative qualities, for these exist in abundance. But, as beneath the seas an intricate drama of struggle and survival lurk behind a sensational, Technicolor world, so to does her flash and pizzazz mask serious ideas. Hesse is interested in the potential of sea-based agriculture, particularly the cultivation of seaweed, an underrated source of nutrition.⁶ In light of a surface world compromised by climate change the oceans may well be a necessary resource for human survival. That is if the land and seas don't disintegrate at the same pace. The promise that carbon dioxide sequestration might offer a partial solution for the build-up of ozone destroying gases in the atmosphere actually comes at a cost. Pumping carbon dioxide into the ocean could lead to increased acidification, which is another mechanism for global warming.

Hesse's work contains no obvious hint at the grim and dire possibilities that may be in store for the oceans. Instead, they seem to be a celebration of the richness contained within. For skeptics and pessimists this could be read as a last gasp bash on behalf of nature's most astonishing resource.

The contribution of Vermont-based artist **Matt Neckers** seems to engage the threat of nuclear war. Neckers is probably best known for his absurd, fanciful miniatures and a comic, mad-tinkerer-working-out-in-the-barn aesthetic. Using a broad selection of leftover materials and found objects he crafts instantly accessible pieces that charm the viewer while slyly introducing more critical ideas. One such piece, not in the current exhibition, is his *Guest Curator's Kit* for the Vermont International museum of Contemporary Art and Design. Contained in a small, white, enameled, metal box reminiscent of those boxes containing first aid kits, one finds a number of objects



5 10 Emerging New England Artists, A Jury of Six Selects an Extraordinary 10 By: Alison Williams http://artnewengland.com/ed_picks/10-emerging-new-england-artists/

6 <http://debbiehesse.com/wall-constructions#/id/i12687863>

that would be of use to the curator. On the inside cover of the lid are instructions and recommendations to the curator, such as, "Arrange artwork inside the galleries for the maximum benefit of viewers." This essentially clues in the viewer that the sensitive, theoretical, refined processes of organizing an exhibition also involve very physical, even blue-collar, skills.

The present show features Neckers' *Self-Guided Missile*. In the spirit of the 1950s' backyard bomb shelters, Neckers' missile looks like one patriotic soul's private



contribution to national defense. Fashioned from sheet metal and boasting a seating area that recalls the pilot's cockpit from an old biplane, this rocket rests on a launch ramp built from aged, repurposed lumber products. One is led to believe that, in the event of a national emergency, the owner operator of the ballistic missile will climb into the cockpit and launch himself into a Don Quixote mission on behalf of the nation. His country salutes him and wishes him luck.

Beginning with common construction materials familiar to most people, **Soo Sunny Park** constructs intricate installations and formally condensed pieces that combine the material with the ethereal. In these, while the physicality is impressive and immersive, it is the dynamic play of light that takes center stage. Light projecting through the substantial structures casts slippery, shadowy shapes onto the surrounding walls. Reflections from kinetic elements change the shapes of structure and shadow alike. The real and the apparent merge and dissolve before the eyes of the viewer forcing adjustments in their consciousness. To achieve these ends Park draws from disciplines beyond simply art-based aesthetics. Her work is informed by concepts and means from such sources as geometry, psychology and physics.

For *Somewhere in the Sequence*, Park contributes two pieces. In *Transitive Testing Ground* from 2008 She has constructed an irregular polyhedron from steel studs, sheetrock, graphite and wood. The sheetrock surface has been meticulously worked to produce a faceted, but still seamless, surface. This very substantial work can be wall-mounted as in the images represented on the artist's website, or set onto a surface parallel to the floor. In the Real Art Ways installation the polyhedral unit rests atop two steel saw horses. Each planar facet of the sculptural form has been ornamented by an irregular grid of triangles, each triangle sporting a single hole neatly drilled through the surface. Light pouring through the holes is projected onto the floor producing one very concrete expression of the hole pattern and one entirely circumstantial. Sandwiched between the two are the steel saw horses. In contemplating the two states of being, the shadowy and the solid, one is tempted to move from a perceptual appreciation to a philosophical approach.



In Park's second piece, *Diffraction*, a mixed media drawing on paper and acetate rests several inches behind an aluminum screen. Once again, as in In "Transitive Testing Ground," the weighty sculptural object is a container for a fugitive perceptual effect as the interaction of the drawing and the screen produces a mirage-like moiré effect.

So when everything around you is going to hell in a hand basket what are we going to do? Winston Churchill recommends "Keep on going."

Gil Scullion, 2019

Gil Scullion is an artist and writer. He teaches art history at Manchester Community College and currently lives and works in Middletown, Connecticut.



About Real Art Ways

Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary arts organizations in the United States, with a record of linking artists, innovation and community. Programs include visual arts, with exhibitions, public art projects, and artist presentations; cinema, with independent and international films seven days a week; music; performance; literary events; community and educational programming.



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