

Kathleen Ritter's Essay for 'Silent As Glue' Catalogue

Notes on Precarity

“‘If’ is the conjunction of contingency. Uncertainty is free. I can’t predict its tangent.”¹

“I started telling the story without knowing the end,” croons Bill Callahan in the first song on the album *Sometimes I Wish We Were an Eagle* (2009)². Immediately it summons the impression that he will extemporize any lyrics that follow; one line leading to the next, without predetermining, or even knowing, what will result. I feel my palms start to sweat. To perform without a script, to improvise in this way, is a considerable risk. Like a persistent anxiety dream of the performance gone awry, one risks the slip, the awkward pause, the telling moment of failure in the face of an expectant audience. Yet, in a culture in which the ability to perform on command is increasingly valued, there is no longer any security or time to prepare the script; improvisation has become a necessary skill.³

I am likewise starting this text without knowing how it will end. I have been asked to write on the work of three artists—Lynda Gammon, Matt Harle and Elspeth Pratt—brought together in an exhibition titled after another evocative Callahan lyric: “Silent as Glue. “ The artists’ works, loosely framed under the term *sculpture*, repurpose a range of materials—paper, cardboard, vinyl, concrete, fabric, cardboard, paint, tape, plastic, foam—in evocative and unexpected ways, and act as a foil to traditional expectations of permanence, coherence and monumentality in modernist sculpture. In fact the works are characterized by a refusal to take up these ambitions, instead opting for a relationship that is more nuanced, intimate and decentered. Unyielding to the increasing pressure to produce spectacles in a global economy that privileges all things grand, the modest presence of these works in the world is no less poignant. In short, the works’ affects are quietly tenacious; they share a muted strength.

As I listen to the Callahan album on repeat while I write, these notes serve not as an expository text on the works, but instead as a proposition - inspired by three unique art practices - on a possible relationship between the aesthetics of the works and the idea of precarity.⁴ I am uncertain what conclusions this exercise will lead to (perhaps none), but I

¹ Lisa Robertson, "Perspectors/Melancholia," *SMART Papers: Hadley+Maxwell: Improperties* (Amsterdam: Smart Papers, 2009) 7.

² Bill Callahan, "jim Cain," *sometimes I wish I Were as Eagle*, compact disc, Drag City © 2009

³ See Jan Verwoert, "I Can, I Can't, Who Cares?," *Open* 17 (2009): 40-45. "What would it mean to put up resistance against a social order in which performativity has become a growing demand, if not the norm?" 41.

⁴ These thoughts on the relationship between art and precarity are indebted to a recent issue of the journal *Open: Cahier on Art and the Public Domain*, which elaborated the theme "A Precarious Existence". See *Open* 17 (2009).

believe that the provisional coupling of these ideas both suits the artwork and follows its methodology. I am choosing here to write *with* the work rather than write *about* the work.

Precarity

As a noun, *precarity* (or precariousness) is more indeterminate and unwieldy than most. That something is precarious implies that its future is hinged on chance circumstances and unknown conditions. It is neither certain nor stable; it bears no inherent right or claim to title, it teeters and threatens to fall over;.

The word *precarious* is far stronger than *uncertain*. Derived originally from the Latin *precari*—which shares the same root as the verb “to pray”—the word first signified that which is granted to entreaty,⁵ and hence is wholly dependent on the will of another. It therefore came to express the highest degree of uncertainty, and is applied to things that depend entirely on future causalities. Further, precarity is characterized by a dangerous lack of security or stability, and this descriptor enters its definitions frequently. We can assume, then, that precarity is uniquely tied to risk. “An object is said to be precarious if it has no definitive status and an uncertain future or final destiny: it is held in abeyance, waiting, surrounded by irresolution. It occupies a transitory territory.”⁶

Can certain art practices be characterized as precarious? What might a precarious art look like? How might it be experienced? How can we recognize a precarious aesthetic? It would have to be more than uncertain, contingent or provisional⁷. Precarity is more charged, inconclusive and distinctly at risk. Likewise, precarity in art is political in that it signifies a kind of resistance through its very form, rather than exclusively through its content. It is not to be confused with something immaterial or ephemeral. Rather it signals a fundamental lack of stability, and this indeterminacy is part of the structure of the work.

To speculate further, I would suggest several characteristics of precarious art. First, the work is conceived without an end in mind; the artist does not predetermine the outcome. Precarity cannot be determined in advance. The work unfolds as part of a process, and

⁵ A *precaria* was a contract granting a petitioner the use of ecclesiastical property for a specified time. While the land's title was not transferred outright, the—rather precarious—occupant would enjoy all the profits and advantages to be gleaned from the property. *Precaria* refers not only to the contract, but also to lands held under the contract.

⁶ Nicolas Bourriaud, "Precarious Constructions: Answers to Jacques Rancière on Art and Politics," *Open* 17 (2009): 32.

⁷ Contingency, provisionality, uncertainty: this is how the works in the exhibition *Unmonumental* were framed, as evidenced by the following quote. “If the term “monumental” connotes massiveness, timelessness, and public significance, the neologism “*un-monumental*” is meant to describe a kind of sculpture that is not against these values (as in “anti-monumental”) but intentionally lacks them. Most obviously, the piecemeal, jury-rigged or put-together state of these new sculptures lends a distinct sense of contingency.” Laura Hoptman, “Unmonumental: Going to Pieces in the 21st Century” in *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2007. 138

aspects of this process are evident in the final work. Second, the interpretation of the work is wholly given over to the viewer. Its meanings are not autonomously held in the work, but are made in collaboration with (and at the will of) a viewer. The work is vulnerable and uniquely open to various readings and misreadings. Third, it is “held by a doubtful tenure”; that is, the work is unstable, its future (both materially and structurally) is left to circumstance, and represents a deep questioning about everything from its formal properties to its signification to its very place in the world.

Interestingly, the term precarity has surfaced in recent years in both academic and activist circles to describe the unique conditions of employment—specifically the prevalence of contingent, flexible or precarious labour—in a neo-liberal, post-Fordist economy.⁸ Thus, the term has become politicized. To consider precarity in relation to aesthetics is to acknowledge this aspect of its meaning, and to think through the relationships between precarity and art as a political project. As Paolo Virno notes “Philosophy . . . has to concern itself with the issue of what resistance forms may be developed starting from the *precari*. This is not a technical problem, on the contrary, it is an ethical matter and also an artistic matter.”⁹ Is it any coincidence that we consistently describe *art* as *work*, as if to underscore the point that we have laboured to make it? Perhaps precarity is a locus where the relations between politics and art are redistributed.¹⁰

In keeping with these distinctions, I would suggest that the works of Lynda Gammon, Matt Harle and Elspeth Pratt are not immaterial or ephemeral but *precarious* in nature. The works cleverly evade traditional hierarchies, and largely do away with traditional sculptural methods and materials. The work’s precarity ensures that it is out of step with conventional artistic traditions, as well as mainstream, market-driven culture. It lacks a proper place in the world.

Lynda Gammon

The work of Lynda Gammon throws a serious wrench in the distinctions between artistic disciplines, flirting with architecture, photography, performance, and sculpture, while being faithful to none. The works first appear as a chaos of ephemera—photographs, paper, tape, wood, foam core—like exploding archives protruding from the wall. References to and images of derelict or otherwise imperfect architectural spaces—often Gammon’s studios—abound, though never in their entirety, frustrating a desire for a complete image.

⁸ See Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, "Precarity as a Political Concept: New Forms of Connection, Subjectivation and Organization," *Open 17* (2009): 48-61.

⁹ Paolo Virno, *The Dismasure of Art*, interviewed by Sonja Lavaert and Pascal Gielen in *Open 17* (2009). 85.

¹⁰ For a description of art in relation to politics as the unique “distribution of the sensible”, see Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

Ironically, the works use sculptural techniques of assemblage by using photography at every turn, but to material rather than pictorial ends. Photographs are taken and developed, printed and cut, taped and glued, draped and woven together, such that no singular, coherent image can be deciphered. The space of the photograph is given over to the tactile, material qualities of the form itself essentially turning the traditional function of the medium inside out. In the series *Cuts* (1985-1998), Gammon takes Polaroids of her studio space, cuts an imperfect rectangle into them, and backs the image with black paper, as if to inject a void in the otherwise primary pictorial plane. The images are then scanned and printed, all of their imperfections visible, even highlighted.

Gammon's studio also functions as a kind of rehearsal/performance space. Her makeshift assemblages are "rehearsed" in the studio, then dismantled and built again for exhibition. The works are essentially performed each time they are made; they are never the same twice. In this way, they exist as a proposition, a hypothesis and a memory. They occupy the dubious ground between process and object, not resolving clearly on one side or another. Take, for example, *Interval # 4* (2010): Long trails of paper are casually draped over horizontal rods and hang down in layers like locks of hair, nearly touching the floor. The layers are woven together with alternating, perpendicular strips of photographs in such a way that refuses completion. Any picture used in the process is only shown in fragments and viewers are likewise forced to read the work in its piecemeal construction, rather than in its entirety.

The lack of preciousness in Gammon's work is evident in both her use of materials and in its construction. Once dismantled, the documentation stands as the only record of its existence. Thus, Gammon's works remain in a perpetually unfinished state. They exist briefly and precariously in the world for limited tenure and, in so doing, place an onus on viewers to remember them. Their precarity arises both in their temporary status, as well as in their intended lack of visual coherence, they are not graspable from any single position, and give themselves over to a viewer to complete.

Matt Harle

On a cursory glance, the works of Matt Harle appears casual and unrestrained, as if the materials have been thrown in the same general direction and left to see what sticks together. On closer inspection, though, the works belie a careful and considered effort to combine unexpected forms and materials in ways that operate according to their own internal logic, a logic that awaits deciphering. Autonomous works emerge from a process-based trajectory, with each finished piece standing as a singular proposition. The works hovers in a deliberately awkward juncture between abstraction and representation,

physical and pictorial space, between support and structure, and at times seem to function symbolically as language. A yellow circle of paint is pinned between sheets of Mylar on a skeletal wooden frame. A cast rubber *X* graces the wall, lines dripping down at various points. Such works seem to want to communicate through these symbols, though to ends that are not clear. A slab of concrete spills out over the floor as an anchor to a metal rod that holds a blue-fringed figure upright. The figure reads anthropomorphically, if only by its faceless, upright stance. A block of foam insulation is cut and carved, a loose “scribble” flanks its surface, the positive space rendered in Hydrocal with the negative space in bright red paint. Here the figure does not just decorate the surface, it also serves as the structure of the work, binding the two sheets of insulation together. Nothing about the work is simple or clean: the marks of its laboured production are evident at every angle. The last work is a sweet, small structure that loosely resembles a folding chair. Parts of a wooden frame lean together, its unstable composition held in place with a pink skin of cast acrylic paint carefully sewn together in places, and attached to the frame with two pins.

The works quietly refuse a kind of visual, structural or material unity. They put forward a range of propositions, without necessitating one in particular, and invite viewers in return to move between differing thoughts on them. In this way, Harle’s works assume the characteristics of a precarious aesthetic. The works’ unfinished quality, their denial of resolution, signals that they are made without a predetermined end in mind. Rather, they are the product of a process that results in forms that could not be imagined from the outset. The works start and end with materials, and tests the limits of what they will allow within a given set of parameters.

Elspeth Pratt

There is a kind of vulnerability in the work of Elspeth Pratt. They offers themselves up for critique, but do not easily lend itself to description or interpretation, at least not through language. They occupy a number of in-between, transitory spaces (both physical and discursive) and, like Gammon and Harle, Pratt’s treatment of form oscillates between abstraction and representation, without favouring one over another.

Pratt uses common materials to reconsider—through unique and singular sculptural forms—how architecture scripts social space. Her choice of ubiquitous building supplies—laminated, wood, cardboard, vinyl, carpet underlay, paint—questions notions of value, monumentality and permanence traditionally associated with sculpture and furthers an interest in the possibilities of materials to describe and articulate our built environment. Deftly referential, Pratt’s works cites major architects like Shigeru Ban and

Le Corbusier, as well as alternate, provisional structures, such as Brazilian *favelas* and the Rural Studio project Lucy's House.¹¹

A number of works included here span the range of form and content in Pratt's work. The use of blue "spa" countertop laminate in a pair of lozenge-shaped constructions (*Escape to Paradise*, 2001) makes oblique reference to the seamless aims of consumerism and leisure. Other forms seem both recognizable and oblique in their architectural references, and evoke more temporary structures, such as scaffolding, balconies or pavilions (*Plaza*, 2009). The works often have a strange and even parasitical relationship to the wall, and appears hinged to it in haphazard, awkward fashion (*X*, 2007). Still other works suggest darker references: a small edifice, for example, leaves only a narrow crack exposed to the wall like the window of a prisoner's cell (*Confinement*, 2009), while its glossy, bright red finish functions as a diversion to its sober allusion. Pratt's work depends on the familiarity of the lumberyard materials and the surprising and contingent methods used to combine them, ultimately undermining the material edifices that constitute our décor.

Pratt has developed a unique and thoughtful sculptural vocabulary whereby architectural standards are both evoked and made strange through what seems like a clever sleight-of-hand, leaving them open for question and critique through poignant, suggested forms. Meaning is rendered through materials that are combined in unexpected ways, forgoing their common use to suggest new possibilities. Pratt's works are precarious in both form and thought; the grounds on which it is made are purposefully dubious, and reveal a thorough questioning of their presence in relationship to the spaces it inhabits.

To consider the works of Gammon, Harle and Pratt as an articulation of precarity in contemporary art is to acknowledge the persistence of a gesture that results in a defamiliarization of the surrounding environment, an *unknowing*, and a means to stimulate new thought and perceptions of the world. Precarity is a tactic to open up a space for questioning, and respond to a dominant culture that privileges all that is stable, complete, fixed as a means to corral and contain difference. "That, to my mind, is the essential content . . . of the political programme of contemporary art: *maintaining the world in a precarious state* or, in other words, permanently affirming the transitory, circumstantial nature of the institutions that partition the state and of the rules that govern individual or collective behaviour."¹² This so-called precarious state is representative of the political and, I would argue, artistic drive to introduce uncertainty and doubt into

¹¹ Lucy's House in Mason's Bend, Alabama was designed by Rural Studio, Auburn University, in 2001-2002, with exterior walls made entirely of stacked compressed surplus carpet tiles. See Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley, *Proceed and Be Hold: Rural Studio After Samuel Mockbee* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005).

¹² Nicolas Bourriaud, "Precarious Constructions: Answers to Jacques Rancière on Art and Politics," *Open* 17 (2009):

known standards of value and form, in order to reveal spaces of possibility and imagination, and new opportunities for thought.