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Standing Still – behind the cover art

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Standing Still – behind the cover art

Abstract

I am drawn to the in-between—to movement at the corners of the eyes, to the moments between one breath and the next. When we want to catch such moments we stand still, we pause, we wait, “with bated breath.” At such moments, I believe, the potential exists for taking on different perspectives and for finding other points of view. Standing still, in a state of stillness, is an action that encapsulates many of my concerns. My work takes form in objects and architecture that collaborate with bodies moving inside them. The space is structured, not as a system, but as a collection of unstable parts, like a kind of precarious machine or puzzle. Standing or moving bodies become part of the spatial and sculptural conversation, as the space responds to their presence, creating a shifting network of small movements and adjustments. I believe that opportunities for change and exchange exist in the accumulation of small displacements and shifts of attention. Through mindful attention and the kind of listening that involves the entire body and all the senses at once, the apparent solidity of the world falls away and we have to find out what things mean again.

Author/Artist Bio

Young-Tseng moves between performance and installation art, finding ways to create shifts of perspective through attention to how human beings move and perceive the space around and between each other. His interest in movement, spatial awareness and the inseparability of mind and body comes to him through training in mime in the techniques of both Marcel Marceau and Etienne Decroux's Corporeal Mime, by way of teachers Christina Sergeant in Singapore and Thomas Leabhart in Claremont, California. He is also indebted to the concepts and forms of Suzuki voice and physical actor training as practiced by Anne Bogart and the SITI Company, and the Six Viewpoints technique for composing space and time conceived and developed by Mary Overlie. Young-Tseng holds an MFA in Studio Art from Claremont Graduate University.

Keywords

movement, stillness, space, objects, architecture, bodies

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Standing Still – behind the cover art

Young-Tseng

My work comes from a focus on attention and listening—the kind of listening that involves the entire body and all the senses at once. For this reason, I am drawn to the in-between—to movement at the corners of the eyes, to the moments between one breath and the next. When we want to catch such moments we stand still, we pause, we wait, “with bated breath.” At such moments, I believe, the potential exists for taking on different perspectives and for finding other points of view. I believe that opportunities for change and exchange exist in the accumulation of small displacements and shifts of attention. The apparent solidity of the world falls away and we have to find out what things mean again.



Standing Still, 2015. Detail of the installation from a low angle. Video projection is on the wall at right. Photo: Brian Jones.

Standing still, in a state of stillness, is an action that encapsulates many of my concerns. Coming to a standstill, stopping or freezing into a state of stasis or immobility, is not the same as stillness. Body movement is a complex play of gravity, momentum, and instability, a constant suspension between falling and not falling. In stillness, all these forces are held in dynamic tension. It is one of the most active states that we can be in, when body and senses stretch out in all directions, ready for whatever happens next.

In my work, this takes form in objects and architecture that collaborate with bodies moving inside them. The space is structured, not as a system, but as a collection of unstable parts, like a kind of precarious machine or puzzle. Standing or moving bodies become part of the spatial and sculptural conversation, as the space responds to their presence, creating a shifting network of small movements and adjustments. It is necessary for the viewer to move around to try to make sense of the whole. This creates an experience that requires searching and journeying on the part of the viewer. In this way I aim to engage the viewer in a kind of “sense-making”—a way of finding shape and meaning in the world using the whole body in movement, touch, sound, breath, vision, and feeling. This complex of senses and sensing is always with us but we are not normally mindful of it until we are displaced in some way. A circus funhouse or a theme park ride may appear similarly calibrated to agitate the senses, but not to focus attention, to create a space for noticing and being still.

I believe in the power of small things. I believe in the power of the mundane, the ordinary, the quiet, and the overlooked to create change. Perhaps this is a romanticized idea of the mundane. But in a world in which the loud holds sway, doing very little except to cause separation, isolation, and the hardening of entrenched ideologies, perhaps the small and the still

can slip between, around, under, or over the walls, to connect people to people and people to the earth in different and better ways.



*Standing Still, 2015. Detail of bodies interacting with the installation.
Photo: Brian Jones.*

Process

I wanted the viewer to walk into a place that evoked the structured randomness and quiet stillness familiar to me from hikes in the rainforest in Malaysia where I come from. It was also important to me to use materials and resources found close to my surroundings and community that I could recycle or repurpose, and to build and mount my artwork using the most elemental ways of fastening and balancing, i.e. with as little gluing and joining as possible. I believe that, when the means of support is simple and clearly visible to the viewer, the forces holding something together or holding it up may be felt and made sense of in the viewer's body, whether

they are conscious of it or not. Finally, sticks and suspended objects appear often in my installation work since I often highlight gravity as the primary force we all have to deal with.

I gathered sticks, posts, dowels, PVC pipes, and other similar material from my previous work and supplemented them with discarded wood from my studio colleagues. All sticks were sharpened, pointed, or tipped at one end to focus awareness of the force of gravity. As my collection of “sticks” grew I looked for a way to organize them across differences in size, shape, and material. I realized they fell into seven “families” by average length. This initial categorization suggested a way to randomize their distribution across the gallery space I was given.

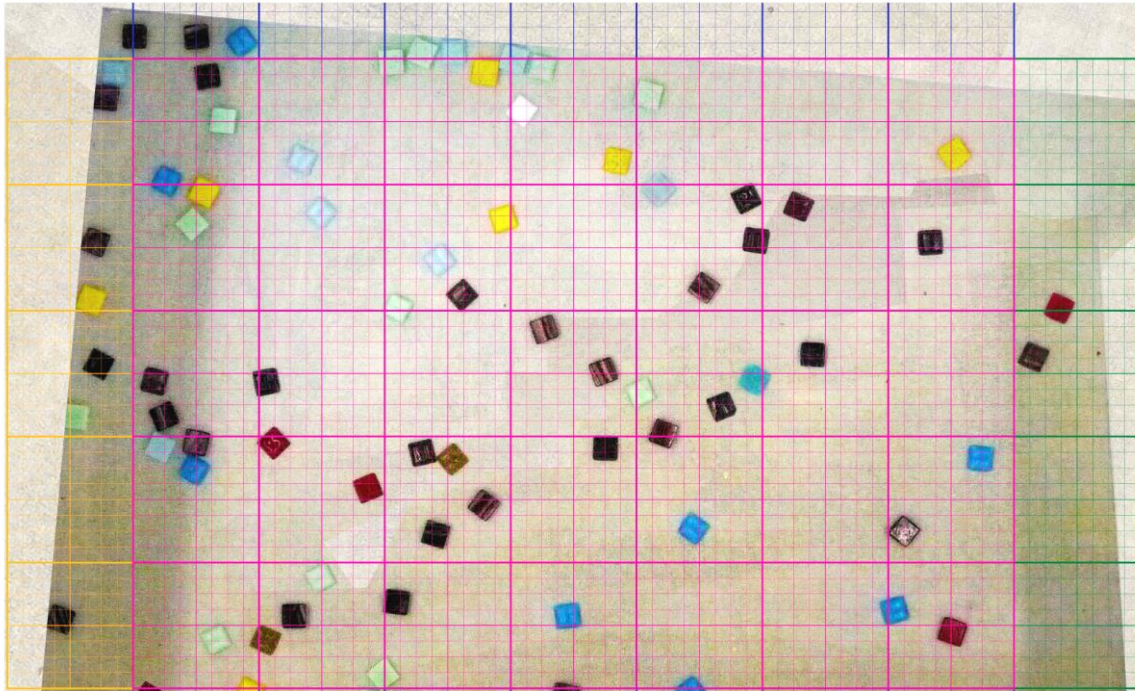
I built a scale model of the gallery in which my installation was scheduled. I color coded each “family” of sticks and found small colored tiles to represent each family. Fortunately, I found tiles that corresponded roughly in scale to a 2ft. x 2ft. square area around each stick. The shape of the tile also suggested how each suspension point and stick might be oriented in relation to the gallery walls which would add to the structured randomization I was looking for. I devised a chance operation using the roll of a dice to determine the order and family to pick up and cast the corresponding tiles into the model gallery. A photo and video was taken of each tile casting to record the positions of the tiles. When a sufficient number of individual family tiling casts had been made, about 12 each, a second series was made recording cumulative tiling casts into the gallery model until all families were cast. A photo from this second series was selected as the distribution map for the sticks.

In order transfer stick positions from the map on to suspension points on the ceiling of the gallery I overlaid the photo map with a grid drawn to scale. Since I did not have sufficient time to both mark the positions and install the sticks prior to opening my show I planned to do the

marking a few weeks ahead. This resulted in a final, unexpected but welcome, re-distribution of the sticks when my colleague, Evan Trine, who was preparing his exhibition in the gallery that week requested extra care and a buffer zone to be sure to protect his framed works on the wall during my marking operations. In order to achieve this and maintain the scale of map and model in relation to the gallery, the final photo map had to be cut and reoriented, not simply scaled down. This negotiation added a collaborative element to the installation that was delightful to me. The piece now felt more alive to me because it was connected outside myself to another person in the space and in my community. Although this element of the installation was invisible and undocumented at the time I would like to think that its effects could be felt in the final installation.



Standing Still, 2015. Photo map made from the final cumulative casting of colored tiles into a scale model of the installation gallery. The tin can at the bottom left of the model represents the space occupied by the entrance to the gallery. Photo: Young-Tseng.



Standing Still, 2015. Final photo map, cut and re-oriented, with grid overlay to scale. Each large square (bold lines) is 4ft. x 4ft. For installation, the main 4ft. x 4ft. grid was laid out on the floor of the gallery with tape. The smaller grid of 1ft. x 1ft. squares was drawn on a mobile 4ft. x 4 ft. platform which was moved into position to transpose positions from the map to the ceiling of the gallery. Photo: Young-Tseng.

Two final compositional elements were included in the installation as necessary counterpoint and contrast to the stillness and variety of the sticks. The first, a video of clouds drifting far above the skylight over my studio, was taken some months before the sticks and my ideas for the installation came together. However, as I tested the sticks and methods of suspending them in my studio and in smaller gallery spaces, I realized that a room full of suspended sticks alone created a space that felt static and claustrophobic. Looking for a way to open and expand viewers' sense of space beyond the room I came back upon the video I took several months earlier. The slow drifting and changing cloud formations also added an element of randomized time to the composition. In contrast, the second compositional element was added

for structure. During testing I realized that the large number, distribution, and variety of sticks somehow narrowed my attention to individual sticks, fragmenting my experience of the installation as a whole and therefore my sense of bodily presence within it. The installation needed a single element of absolute consistency to anchor mine and viewers' sense of presence. I found that element by suspending the pointed tip of each stick 0.75 inches from the ground. The height was set using the cast iron base of a laboratory retort stand that I had found and used in a previous piece. With all these elements in place I felt that my installation was doing everything I hoped it would do experientially as well as aesthetically for the viewers who encountered it.