

Leslie Hewitt

*before
the
frame,
before
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shutter*

Words
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Photography
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Currently residing in Houston, Texas, by way of Saint Albans, New York, the institutional metronome of Leslie Hewitt's practice can be demarcated by a BFA from Cooper Union in 2000 and an MFA in sculpture from Yale University in 2004. She was included in the 2008 Whitney Biennial and has exhibited widely at the Museum of Modern Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem (AIR 2007-2008), Artists Space, and Project Row Houses. Across these years, deep study birthed the capacity to wield the silence around Black intellectual life into a photography and sculpture practice of equipotential. Perusing the sociopolitical histories of the still life from a post minimalist perspective, Hewitt posits disembodied encounters and gestures of collision through references of culturally significant ephemera and Black literature. Akin to the jazz tradition of "keeping time," Hewitt's distillation of images and language measures the tempo at which place and history intertwine itself with meaning making.

DIALLO SIMON-PONTE: I heard you've been travelling. Where are you in the world right now? Are you elsewhere or home in Houston?

LESLIE HEWITT: I visit New York all the time but am currently in Houston. The great thing about Houston is its relative equidistance from Los Angeles, New York, Mexico City and Chicago. I was in Los Angeles earlier this year, and in New York maybe just a few weeks ago.

DSP: Recently, I departed my home in New York and am now living in Louisville, Kentucky. I made the mistake of carrying the pace of the city with me; however, very quickly, the South tells you that you have to slow down. What is the pace of your days like in Houston?

LH: I think time, place, and pace are affected by your corporeal memory, your bodily memory. I do not feel like I am corporeally connected to the location I am in, even though I am here. I know that sounds strange. A lot of the things that move me

structurally in New York have to do with architecture, personal memory and a sense of place. I definitely feel a sense of dislocation in Houston. But somehow through language and affect, I regain a sense of connection. Even though the visual markers around me are not familiar, I find grounding. I am married to an artist, Jamal Cyrus, who is from Houston and who has an atonal cadence that marks time here, and the vernacular he brings, his mode of speech and recognition of place, adds so much. It gives me a richness that isn't dependent on physical architecture but is dependent on the ritual of actively engaging the structures of memory.

DSP: It sounds like you have had to find solace and familiarity in the architecture of language. How has that shifted your temporal realities? How do you wake up, how do you go to sleep, and when do you arrive at the studio?

LH: I feel like the studio, which has been true for me, is always in my mind.



Even if I am not physically there, I am thinking about what is there. So when I return, the ideas and feelings are fresh. I am also currently a professor at Rice University and in the spirit of the studio and the research that extends into such a space, I taught a course titled Color, Perception, and Composition. But maybe you want more everyday things. I wake up pretty early every day. I try to walk by the Bayou and head to the studio. Usually, first I'm reading with Jamal as a meditative practice, and also *dhikr* (remembrance). As Muslims, *dhikr* sets the tone of the day. It's a marker for organizing myself and expending a sense of time.

DSP: A couple of years ago, I watched Christina Sharpe read prose she had written in response to a series of Ming Smith images, and it became so strikingly clear she creates expanse in the quotidian and embeds herself in the quiet. I feel like I see that so much in your work. How do you allow that to flower in your everyday life?

LH: To be honest, I am an introvert. I also think that's part of being a photographer, someone who sees through a lens as a mediation. You're relying on the disembodied eye to see in a certain way. You're present, but you also have this distance to look from a different perspective. Even if I don't always make a photographic image, photography as a discipline has shaped how I understand being in the world. So there has to be this delay, and I don't think I know how to undo that. It's part of me.

DSP: For that reason, I love watching photographers walk, Dawoud Bey in particular. He strides so carefully and seems to carry with him that halfspace you just shared. Speaking about disembodiment, you've talked about producing a disorienting encounter in your work. If the order of your day, which you've shared, is quite structured, how do you allow space for rupture or the possibility of disorientation in your life?

LH: This is such an observant ques-

tion. In short, I guess the mundane and the everyday can create an excellent environment for the unexpected or for the unaccounted for to arise. In film and music, there is the term contrapuntal, in dance and music there is the idea of syncopation. Both terms create tension and complexity. To answer your question, the structure provides space for its opposite and, on a poetic register, both can operate in harmony, discord, or dissonance.

DSP: In regard to the consequences of geography and place, which is where we began this conversation, I want to ask you about your time in the Houston-based community arts neighborhood, Project Row Houses. The exhibition with William Cordova, L. Kaneem Smith, yourself, and others for Artist Round 23 at PRH really stands out. Does your time spent in such an environment remain present in your practice?

LH: Wow, thank you, I loved that round and it was an honor to be invited and to



do the installation *I wish it were true* along with film screenings. Project Row Houses collapsed perceived gaps in such a beautiful way, where a work like that could fit so seamlessly as both a critique and a celebration. I lived at Project Row Houses in one of the renovated shotgun houses as part of a partnership between the Core residency and PRH. It has left a huge impression on me — the way such a fluid and porous space for conceptual art and communal socio-political discourse challenged gentrification and everyday life. It reminded me that art does not have to yield to extractive logic. PRH represented a kind of maroonage, in the way Greg Tate describes staying where you are and building a sacred political and artistic space all at once. So Dope!

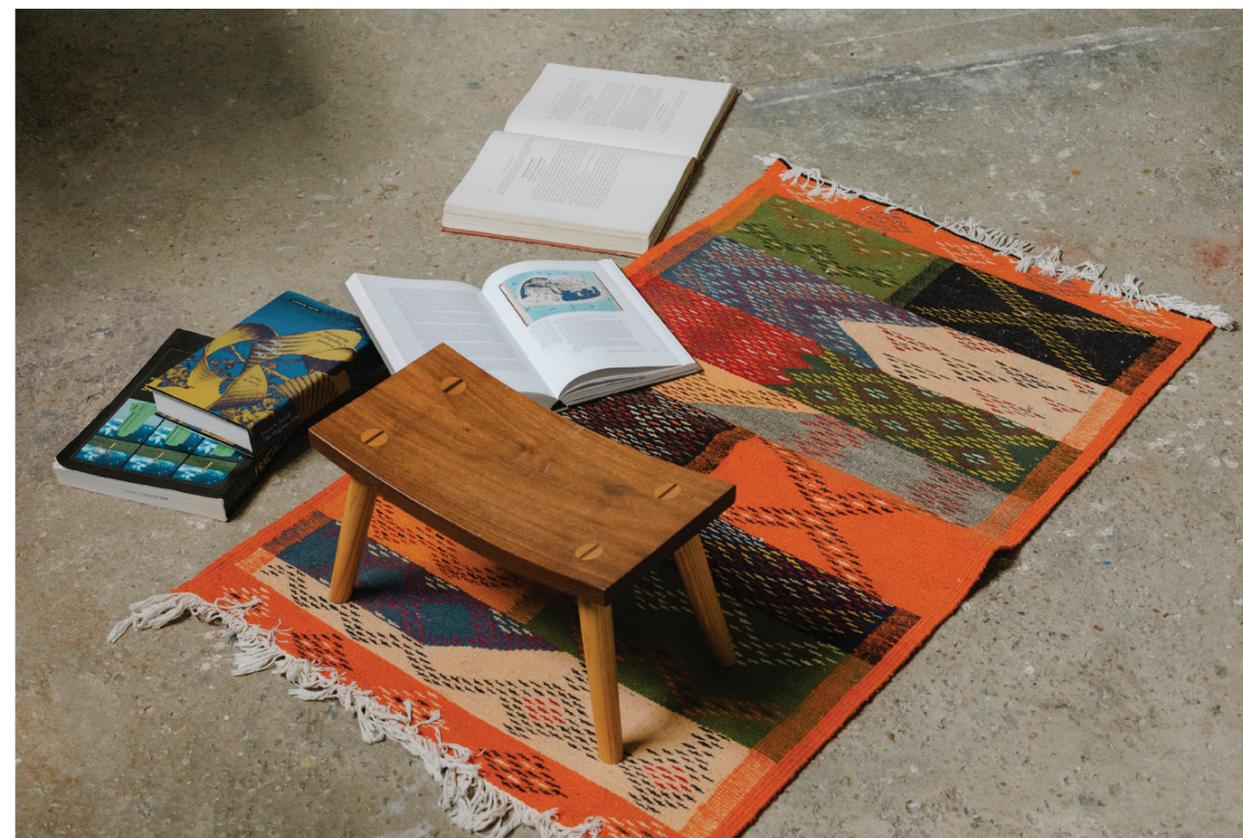
DSP: In that sense of porosity and the sculpting of space, I want to pivot to your project at DIA Bridgehampton, which was formerly an African American Baptist church. What was your process of arrival

there and how did you use that exhibition as a paradigm? The sonic was also an integral investigation as Jamal Cyrus, Immanuel Wilkins, Rashida Bumbray and Jason Moran were involved.

LH: Part of my existence as an artist is the realization of the importance of the less obvious, just below the surface. I am interested in ancestry, and there is still more to uncover. On my maternal side, we can trace our family in New York back to 1827, which is rare. That awareness complemented my interest in cemeteries, census records, and city maps. The names tell stories about eminent domain and the general disregard for Black cemeteries or burial sites. I was also attracted to the spaces where free people of color and indigenous burial grounds intersected, specifically along Long Island. Land has stories and so does the ocean. DIA Bridgehampton was the perfect moment to explore this fascination. Dan Flavin decided not to erase the history of the church by preserving artifacts. The colors he used

in his permanent installation pointed to a sonic logic of the history of the building as well because it was also a volunteer firehouse along its timeline. When I saw that, I knew it was the right moment to address mid-20th century Formalism in its historical context. In the mid-20th century, you had the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-war movement, and more. Looking back, you can fold time and resist the fiction that isolates artists from their social and political landscapes. Flavin had already done that, so I made a work that expanded horizontally. Once a work touches the ground, it obeys gravity and extends outward so the walls become a point on a line rather than barriers. I was reading Tiffany Lethabo King's *Black Shoal*, which gave me a conceptual framework for faith in such an encounter.

Amiri Baraka in *Blues People* helped me to realize that there was another story in the sonic register. As much as we want to imagine that what makes it a church is the four walls, the reality is that sonic space



carries stories, sentiment, and a kind of wish that moves forward through time. It doesn't need walls, it's not bound by architecture. That's where the idea of creating an indeterminate score comes from. This approach was new for me, though repetition, structure, and composition flow throughout my practice.

DSP: I'd like to take a moment and pay homage to the late Koyo Kouoh. You were included in a show she helped curate: "Photography Beyond Capture." She is still with us and will always be with us. I wonder what proximity to her was like and how it felt to be cared for with such a fitting conceptual title like that?

LH: Well, it felt like a huge honor. I met her for the first time in preparation for "Currency: Photography Beyond Capture" for the 8th Triennial of Photography in Hamburg, Germany — Oluremi Onabanjo introduced us. And if I may say, her smile was electric. Her style — so elegant, beautiful. She floored me just on that alone. What

moved me immediately, and one of the reasons I love being an artist, is that you speak through your work. Though I didn't know her before, I knew of her. I didn't know that she knew of my work. And when we met, she was so exacting in her language. I didn't have to explain anything. She saw it, and it was clear. That affirmed for me why I didn't stop when I was a student. I made the work, but wondered, "Is it?" That kind of belatedness — it just felt like an embrace. Her energy — positive, critical, firm, and clear — is not lost at all.

DSP: You have exhibitions at Perrotin New York and the Norton Museum of Art this fall. I am reading *The Most Secret Memory of Men* by Mohamed Mbougar Sarr right now and there's a part where he writes that the worst question anyone can ask is, "What is a book about?" Because it feels like a trap — you can never adequately answer it. Instead of asking what your presentations are about, I want to adjacently ask what emotional landscapes you are

putting forth in these shows?

LH: I hope the shows carry a sense of freeing oneself from obsolete notions of time and space. I hope it is an atmospheric, visual, and, to use your term, emotional landscape that echoes this critical position. I hope it offers a sense of quietude. That it moves, like *Riffs on Real Time* does, as a slow read, a slowing down that carries different qualities — of observation, of deepening, of opening eyes — a feeling of moving slowly across the surface of something, of touching something for the first time, of seeing something anew.



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