

# INVENTORY

## Leslie Hewitt: Just In Time

*On a bright autumn morning in October, we met with Leslie Hewitt to discuss time, space, light and photography's lyrical moment.*

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When light comes through the French doors of Leslie Hewitt's studio, it sweeps downward, hits the white walls and the skirting board before pooling on the floor. This light has a particular assuredness in its angle; you cannot mistake where it's coming from or where it's going. This light is also the light that can be seen in many of Hewitt's photo sculptures: it comes from somewhere outside the frame, strikes the objects composed within the image – books, papers, clay, fruit –and demands that they become dimensional.

When Hewitt installs her photographs, it's a similar story. She exhibits them in wooden frames standing on the floor, propped against the wall. The gallery's light source catches them from an angle and suddenly the back and sides of the photo-object are just as important as the front. Occasionally, such as in *Make it Plain* (2006), one of the objects from the photograph is affixed to the gallery floor, almost as if to welcome the pictures to their newfound objecthood.

Light is important to Hewitt's work because time is, too. When a natural light source appears in an image, there is no mistaking the actuality of time. In several of Hewitt's series, objects are rearranged and recaptured at different moments. As the day's light changes, new shadows are cast and a temporality is created that cannot be ignored.

This temporality, however, is complicated. Part of Hewitt's project is to break down time's perceived linearity, and she does this not only with light but also with the actual objects depicted in her work. In *Riffs on Real Time* (2002-2005), a series of ten, some of which were exhibited as part of MoMA's *New Photography 2009* exhibition, Hewitt photographed family photographs, letters, magazines and books against wooden floorboards and shag pile rugs. Several different histories collide: the objects are artifacts that span several eras, but they are also apprehended in "real time."

*Leslie Hewitt: Sudden Glare of the Sun* (2012), Hewitt's solo show at The Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis includes several photo sculptures from the *Blue Skies, Warm Sunlight* series (2011). This work presented varying arrangements of objects, snapshots and books, including a partially legible copy of *The Politics of Protest* (1969) – "the study of the socio-political climate surrounding the anti-war and civil rights protests in America during the 1960s." This book points to a very specific moment in American history, but its inclusion in Hewitt's work means it is also *here, now*. The object contains the memory of the social and political conditions that gave rise to its production – and here, beside objects as quotidian as personal photographs and a piece of plywood, the viewer is asked to reconcile this history with the object's newly immediate

presence.

If I am being honest though, it is not fair to say that Hewitt *asks* the viewer to do anything. Her work is not imposing by any means; instead, it gently invites reception, consideration and engagement, all those processes of application through which an artwork – and history itself – can become infinitely rich.

A conversation with Leslie Hewitt:

*What are you thinking about these days in terms of your work?* Most recently, my days are filled with a collaborative project with cinematographer

Bradford Young. Rashida Bumbray [independent curator and former curator at The Kitchen, New York] introduced us in 2010. We met and, in essence, began a conversation, which has continued until now. The way that Mr. Young conceptualizes time and space parallels the way that I address similar concerns – although he has a completely different approach and ultimately a distinct chain of transmission, our collaboration has shifted the way I approach the concept of time. Moving from work with still photography and sculpture to exploring the potential of the moving image and installation is a record of this shift. Together we explore dual-channel projections, short silent vignettes, colour and film speed, expanding our collective visual vocabulary. Our collaboration engages time as a material, looking at hidden arcs in 20th century historical narratives and positioning such moments in relation to our contemporary moment in time.

*Does cinema feel like a completely new language?* I always wanted the photographic image to act differently, to somehow encompass more. Keeping in mind that still photography and cinematography have a strong relationship, it is very new for me to deal with time in *time*; exploring what can happen across a succession of frames. It is exciting really. I have always had an uncomfortable relationship with still photography – but my discomfort, I think, allows for me to push against set conventions and to imagine the photographic plane in ways that strive to address nuance and perception, bringing the photographic moment closer to a sense of reality, in material and sculptural terms. In this regard, I was introduced to Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film: Redemption of Physical Reality* via the critical work of Miriam Bratu Hansen while I was a fellow in Berlin at the American Academy in the spring. The text investigates the materiality of early film and the cinematic experience. Reading it expanded and affirmed the paradigm shift we are experiencing today in a truly uncanny way.

*You have dealt with the idea of trying to get outside of the photographic plane in your still photography, by exploring the sculptural dimension of photography. Is film able to be physical and sculptural in the same way?*

I feel so. The sculptural moment is the cinematic moment, the cinematic experience, the space between the viewer and the actual film moving in time, right? I think the moment one's sense of reality shifts or is changed in some way – to include more than the optical experience – means the notion of sculpture is operating. I also feel that the moment one's sense of space and time is relying on, engaged with or challenged by the laws of gravity and physics, the notion of sculpture is operating. There's still this relationship to viewing that I keep in perspective while working with film, where the film can be mirrored in the physical installation and you can literally enter the work. There is an ideal point of perspective for the work in this regard.

*The ideal point of perspective for sculpture is an interesting idea. I am aware of sculptors who don't believe in an ideal point of perspective because to reduce the available vantage points sort*

*of flattens the object.*

You can experience my sculptures in terms of the peripheral view, which I think is embedded in what I photograph, too. It's not only about the center. The center is often blocked. Everything kind of happens outside of the center. I feel like perspective is what links the language of optics to the viewing experience, which is older than photography – it is the study of the eye, the study of how we see. It's the science of it. Perspective in terms of what art history inherited is only part of the narrative. Discussing the idea of an ideal perspective is, in essence, about returning the dialogue to the viewer, to that personal connection with a work – I rely on that. I feel like that's the conversation, and that's contingent on having the potential for an ideal perspective – that moment where a work becomes clear.

*I read an interview that you did with Colleen Smith for BOMB and she discussed how filmmakers in the 1970s shaped people's cultural memory with their anticipations of the future. Do you think in those terms when you're working with film? Are you concerned with that idea of retrospectively shaping memory?*

Colleen is amazing in this analysis of the energy and intentionality of a certain generation of filmmakers who were visualizing the future, linking it to notions of progress and a complex reality that moved through the known traumas of the 20th century. I get it, but the '60s avant-garde film practice of

Third Cinema has exposed me to a very direct premise. If you want to tell a new story, a distinctly counter-narrative, you have to be fearless, not only in terms of narrative structure but also in grappling with the aesthetic form.

To answer your question regarding memory, I am very interested in how an art practice can engage with time and history. Pulling aspects of history into the present tense for critical engagement – I am completely invested in this act. The shift to working with film as a material has exposed me to new ways to address these concerns.

*Do you believe that time is linear?*

I do understand that time moves in a certain trajectory, but what is amazing about exploring the impact of certain historical narratives in the medium of photography and, in this regard, film, is that you have to open up the notion of time to look critically. You have to break rules, which is why in a photograph I will show material cultural artifacts referencing 1968 along with objects referencing 1989, for example. They are connected, obviously not through sharing the same space and time in terms of point of origin, but through the act of photographing them together. They are linked and the power of association opens up the notion of time, where the moment lingers in the present tense, exploring the space in between, the (un) pictured moments, exposing the hidden interlocutor, the eye of the photographer. I'm not a historian, per se. I'm an artist who utilizes history, the historiographical as material. I don't want to say that I *manipulate* history because that may sound sinister and inauthentic. What I do feel is the freedom to shape material to point to genuine sentiments and critical ideas around concrete historical facts.

*It is often assumed that there is a very literal, even reductive relationship between an artist's references and their work. I read an interview where someone was suggesting that you reference minimalism and so on, and you sort of refused to be pinned down in that way.*

I feel it is perhaps easier to refer to movements and moments in art history that are securely

within the canon. But something is lost in that: the moment to craft a new argument. Influenced, yes, but there are so many influences that deserve and need a platform of articulation, expressing how artists are transforming in their own time. When we can only address the past and not look to describe how artistic gestures are operating now, in our contemporary moment, what does that mean? Why do we have such blind spots? It really points to the inadequacy of language at crucial times to address the complex nature of the creative process.

*Perhaps it's an aesthetic problem, where people forget that an image is also three-dimensional and in-the-world. There is something about photography especially – perhaps its flatness, as it's closer to a two-dimensional image – where people think of it as one point in a straight historical line, in a tradition.*

The exciting thing about conceptual photography, which really emerged alongside minimalism and Third Cinema in the 1960s, is that these artists and filmmakers were asking for their medium to do something different. There had to be a break. I guess contemporary photographers now are doing some- thing similar, exploring the picture plane in immensely interesting ways. It is hard to pin down. It is a lyrical moment, really.

*Many artists are reluctant to acknowledge art and the sociopolitical framework as inextricable in the way that you do. It seems that no one wants to be a “political artist.”*

Artists exist in society. Even an apolitical position is a political position. We are always connected to the time that we're in. However that manifests for artists is the genuine position of that moment. All of the conditions of our time, as complex as they are, are what we have to bear. We are in the late stage of global capitalism; artists have to contend with that. We are also technically still at war in the US; artists have to contend with that. Fifty years from now, when someone looks back and says, “What was happening?” artists have to contend with that. Moving from the 20th century into the 21st, visibility has radically shifted. The dematerialization of the photographic image and the virtual space we inhabit, at this point, are inextricably part of and literally shape the atmosphere we experience. Artists are involved with this and that, in essence, is a political gesture. —

## Field Notes

01 *The Third Cinema* In *Towards A Third Cinema*, published in the late '60s, Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino state: “What determines Third Cinema is the conception of the world, and not the genre or any explicitly political approach. Any story, any subject can be taken up by Third Cinema. In the dependent countries, Third Cinema is a cinema of decolonization, which expresses the will to national liberation, anti-mythic, anti- racist, anti-bourgeois, and popular.” The Third Cinema, as opposed to the First Cinema (of Hollywood and the ruling classes) and Second Cinema (of a freer authorship but still one that is “trapped inside the fortress,” according to Godard) is a “cinema of revolution” based on “inhibition-removing practice and experimentation.”

02 *Siegfried Kracauer* Siegfried Kracauer was a German theorist and cultural critic. Among many other ideas relating to early cinema and photography, he described memory as under threat from technology. He pointed to photography, which, in its ability to capture a moment in time, suspends experience and memory in an object (the photograph) devoid of emotion. He saw the moving image in film as addressing the natural constraints of the still photographic image.

03 *The Photographic Plane* The photographic plane is the flat area in which a photograph is documented; the field in which the image takes form. The photographic plane is not the subject of a picture, but can perhaps become a sort of subject if the photograph's physical potential is explored in a sculptural way.

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