

Barbara Kasten

by Leslie Hewitt

opposite:
METAPHASE 5,
1986, Cibachrome,
37 x 29 ³/₈ inches.
Images courtesy
of the artist and
Bortolami, New York,
unless otherwise
noted.

right:
SCENE III, 2012,
archival pigment
print, 54 ¹/₂ x 43 ¹/₂
inches.





Photo-documentation of Barbara Kasten working in her studio, New York, NY, 1983. Photo by Kurt Kilgus. Courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania.

opposite: AMALGAM UNTITLED 79/34, 1979, analog enlargement and photogram on silver gelatin, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bortolami, New York.

I had the chance to finally meet artist Barbara Kasten, after admiring her work from a distance since the late '90s. We met formally through the exhibition *The Material Image*, curated by Deb Singer in 2014. The exhibition explored aspects of material specificity and medium definitions, among other core themes relating to contemporary photographic practices, and was a clear celebration of experimentation.

Many questions formed in my mind after encountering Kasten's intricate practice. Her photographic gestures are bold, clear, and formally striking. They are windows into a world of light and its opposite, into photosensitive color fields and their reduction transformed into endless gray hues that fill the optical plane. Her approach is playful, imaginative, and critically challenging. Her practice's explicit fragmentation and her staging of optical worlds are perfect visual correlates to our current understanding of time and space, via our interaction with the virtual world. Kasten's engagement with the construction of space has a strong undercurrent paralleling its antithesis: deconstructivism, an exciting kind of anti-architecture offering much to learn from.

We conducted our interview over Skype as she was preparing for the survey *Barbara Kasten: Stages* at the ICA in Philadelphia. As I was in New York and she was in Chicago, I first asked her to describe her

studio to me. I had a kind of "memory image" of it even though I have not physically visited it. She spoke of a rather large industrial space, filled with materials she has collected and saved from previous sets or sculptural compositions. I had imagined a simple classification system. Arranging materials according to color, form, and size would seem necessary, I thought. Yet she did not describe this; this desire for some organizing principle might have been my own projection. I imagined the materials in her studio to have idiosyncratic locations, being propped, stacked, and hung.

Rather unexpectedly, her account arrived at a black box—a "stage" and photographic studio simultaneously. It should not have surprised me, as the void is ever present in her work—be it white, gray, or any other color, including black. This black box provides an imaginative space in her studio, a theatrical and cinematic device allowing for transformation. It is there that her material selections become actors and the camera collapses space, magnifying subtle gestures into epic dramas where light meets surface.

Light. Corner. Softened. Fold. Reflection. Line. Glare. Sharp. Scratch. Shadow. Quiet. Edge. Moiré. This simple exercise of word, image, and memory—the description of her studio—helped set the stage for our conversation. It was a kind of warm up.

— Leslie Hewitt

LESLIE HEWITT: I want to get to video, but not yet. We're discussing the areas in which you make the sculpture, or the set, tangible and experiential for viewers. You've done that previously, in the 1980s, and now you're moving again toward that relationship, with the physicality of the structures you create. You said that there's an intimacy at times. I use the word in a way that it's not meant for, relating it to viewers' consumption.

BARBARA KASTEN: Well, that's true, there is that sense of privacy and there's also a bodily connection, because of the set's scale. It's not a tabletop situation. One of the things that works for photography is the ability to change the scale—to work small and have it appear larger in the photograph. Most

of what I do is almost one-to-one or even the opposite, in that sometimes the sculptures are larger and appear miniaturized in the photographs. The weight and scale of the materials I choose are important because the pieces are not attached; the acrylic panels lean on one another by gravity only. I work in their construction, placing elements in juxtaposition and directing the light to create shadows. The light is the key component, which activates and defines the phenomenon that will be recorded on film.

Many photographic processes are no longer available—Cibachrome is one of them; I am sorry that it is not easily available today. Digital printing has become one-size-fits-all because it's the most available and inexpensive. Although I've made digital archival

prints for recent work, for my new series, *Transpositions*, I am using a photographic process, Fujiflex, that translates the spatial quality of the film.

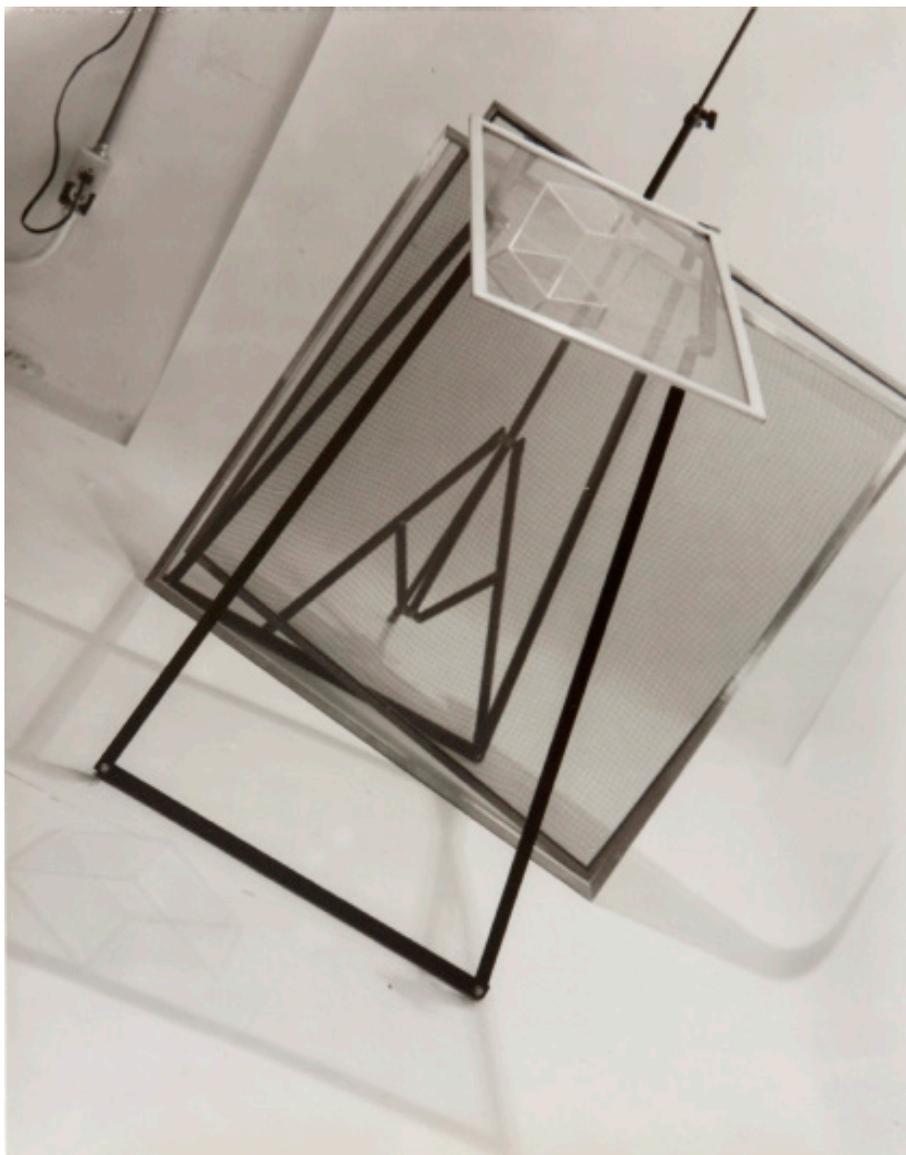
LH: I use words like the *physical* versus the *proxy* or the *virtual*, but when I look at your work, I often think that it's exploring the elasticity of photography. It's even broader than we want to think, right? We were probably both taught that photography is a set of materials, or of conditions, but your work defies that—you're not following conventions. When and where did this begin for you?

BK: My introduction to photography was not an academic one. I took one class to learn the basics; after that, it was more of a hands-on relationship. To push the boundary of photography has never been my motivation; I am interested in how it can be united with other disciplines. I was influenced by artists in California, where I lived in the 1960s and '70s, who were experimenting in many material arenas: James Turrell with light projections, Craig Kauffman and Helen Pashgian with plastics, the finish fetish surfaces of John McCracken. I had no restrictions on how to approach photography. I felt free to incorporate any of these concepts into my thinking. I wasn't breaking rules; I was actually making up my own.

I looked more at Agnes Martin than at any photographer; there was a kinship between our imagery, processes, and obsessions. She wasn't a role model—she wasn't that much older than me—but she was certainly ahead of the game and I liked her meditative connection to making art.

LH: Pointing to why your work looks the way that it looks is crucial to hear. I mean, it is not a condition of being able to use Photoshop, right? There the possibility of someone outputting something that they are not fully invested in constructing is embedded in the system.

BK: Right. I too think it is important. My work is being discovered by a group of people who are half my age and are looking at photography in a much more open-minded manner. It doesn't all have to be done through the camera. I think the creative spirit of the day is more toward individualism, and that fuels younger people to see how they can put





ARCHITECTURAL SITE 7, July 14, 1986, Cibachrome, 60 x 50 inches.
 Location: World Financial Center, New York, NY.
 Architect: César Pelli. Courtesy of the artist, Bortolami, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania.

opposite:
CONSTRUCT 32, 1986, Cibachrome, 40 x 30 inches.
 Courtesy of the artist, Bortolami, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania.



METAPHASE 3, 1986, Cibachrome, 38 x 29 3/4 inches.

their own twist into this medium. We are looking at the essentials and not looking at traditional prescriptions. Now the medium is open for all kinds of experimentation, and that's how you and I are connecting, right?

LH: Yes; that's right. Do you think that we can redefine the word *photography*? That the word actually can encompass more than what we've allowed it to thus far? Could we view it as an expanding medium?

BK: It's much more than one medium today, and the intention of the artist can be different from what was done in the earlier days of fine art, black-and-white silver gelatin prints. Media is an important source today for photographers, and it always has been. Even in the 1920s, a lot of interesting work came from graphic design: El Lissitzky, Rodchenko, and Moholy-Nagy revolutionized uses of photography and typography. Other photographers, such as Florence Henri, whom people associate with me because of the mirrors we both use, did commercial work in addition to fine art. In the 1980s I also worked commercially with an art director at Pentagram to make an annual report. In addition, I did an ad for Absolut and a fashion magazine spread.

The Internet and digital technologies are providing fertile ground for artists today. Photography is now an even broader category, and whether or not these practitioners are photographers is an open question.

LH: I was born in the '70s, so maybe that's where I want to connect us also. We could go further back and talk about the experiments happening within the Bauhaus via Moholy-Nagy, Benita Koche-Otte, or even Gertud Arndt, but I'm curious to bring it closer to the present day. I think about the Pictures Generation, who challenged the expectations of photography by questioning/playing with the idea of the photograph. Do you feel any connection to that moment in the conversation? Cindy Sherman, for instance—she's the quintessential Pictures Generation artist. I bring this up not to draw a formal connection, but perhaps a more conceptual one.

BK: The Pictures Generation artists pushed the photograph into places it hadn't been thought to belong. From a different stance, I was also concerned with

Even philosophers disagree on what it is: Is space an entity unto itself? An entity between one object and another? Some part of a conceptual fabric of ideas? I think it can be all of these.

repositioning the photograph by constructing structures in space. Although many of the questions that I was asking about the photographic image are not dissimilar from those that artists in New York were asking. I was working in a very different context in California—also, I am a bit older than them. Even though my *Construct* series ultimately points back to the conceptual question of the construction of the photograph, it is less concerned with the state of media than with material.

LH: I love that Agnes Martin comes to mind too, the deep contemplation that her work emanates—which is also a part of your work. I look forward to the ICA exhibition to be able to spend time in front of your many bodies of work. As in Agnes Martin's work, there is a lifelong engagement with some aspect of geometry, or with the body's limits—

БК: Right, right.

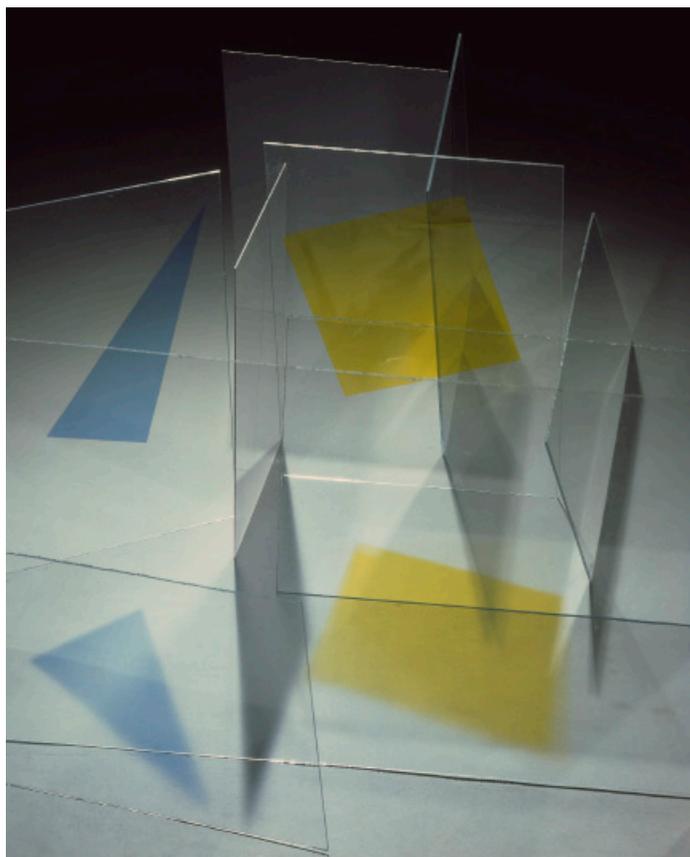
LH: Or with time. Can we go into this more ethereal space? I'm curious how you would describe these questions, or desires, that call you to continue to construct your compositions with the same interest in line or using the same materials.

БК: Even though the same material may appear in several bodies of work, its role is different in each one. I first used the fiberglass screen, for instance, in the *Photogenic Painting* photograms (1974–76). The inherent properties of the screen produced moiré patterns that are ephemeral and beautiful—the antithesis of an industrial building fabric meant to cover windows, which has an obviously practical purpose, not an aesthetic one. When I used it again in 2010, in *Scenes*, it had a relationship to theatrical lighting projections. In each situation, I learn something about the material that encourages me to explore it further.

As far as the intellectual questions that propel me, there might be some that I ask of myself or of the material. However, mine is more of an intuitive process. In the recent work, my

left:
TRANSPPOSITION 8,
2014, Fujiflex digital
print, 60 × 48 inches.

opposite:
TRANSPPOSITION
7, 2014, Fujiflex
digital print, 60 × 48
inches. Courtesy of
the artist, Bortolami,
and the Institute
of Contemporary
Art, University of
Pennsylvania.



underlying question is whether it is possible to make an abstract photograph. The camera requires a subject. I avoid representational objects and select clear acrylic planes that block light and therefore create shadow.

Geometry is also a vehicle for me. I hope it doesn't sound frivolous to say geometry is in every aspect of my life. I am a terrible perfectionist, from the arrangement of objects in my home, to the precision I attempt to achieve in my work. I'm trying to stay true to who I am. I simply do what my gut tells me to do and it happens to feel good when I get to a juncture of ideas that resonate for me. They all seem to happen to have some similarity as I go on.

LH: I see a quite beautiful thread throughout the work—it might come from a place that doesn't necessarily need to be described. I appreciate that you protect that. I wouldn't say that to have an inquiry in one's work means you

have to have a formula, a set idea, or some type of structured path.

БК: I envy people who have a vision that can be isolated as a certain concept and follow it. Sol LeWitt is an artist I admire for his consistency in various forms, from painting to sculpture. He sticks with it.

LH: I want to ask you a little bit more on geometry. One of the series that I'm drawn to is *Studio Constructs* (2007). Maybe this is because of my own work, since I have an interest in exploring geometry. I love that it pushes back onto the camera. I'm looking at a gorgeously composed photograph; it's balanced and is showing me these principles that also make the image possible, if that makes sense. It's not addressing chemistry, which also makes it visible, but the principles—the mirroring effect, the refraction of light embedded within the tool of the analog camera. There's a

quiet back and forth between the tool/camera, what you're constructing, and the memory image/our imagination.

БК: Right. That's very nicely put. Geometry is important to the way I create an image, but you're right, it's not just formal. It has more to do with interaction and the different aspects of three-dimensionality. I don't think of geometry as flat, but as three-dimensional. That is what's interesting to me about space. Even philosophers disagree on what it is: Is space an entity unto itself? An entity between one object and another? Some part of a conceptual fabric of ideas? I think it can be all of these. I like working within one aspect of space at a time or all simultaneously. It's interesting when you think about what's out in the world that's really in our heads, the reality of space and our own limited knowledge of the world around us.

ЛН: Your work with color is very nuanced. It's not just about color. You can correct me, because I'm not as aware of all the processes that you use. You're projecting light onto a surface, but that light bounces onto another surface and then creates another very special translation of the same light or the same hue. The process creates this soft, nuanced, spatial atmosphere. So color is another material for you. I guess I'm interchanging color and light; maybe we could make a distinction. There's something about the non-physical, or perhaps more perceptual elements in the work, that you're recording as well.

БК: I agree with what you're saying. I'm not basing the color I use on anything that people would identify—like green is grass, or yellow, the sun. You might see blue grass and I might see green grass for all we know. I'm not using color in any metaphorical way. I'm using it for what it does when light is carrying it, so it's a marriage of both.

That's particularly true in the newest series I'm doing, *Transpositions*, because there's no representation or value to the color or the shape. It's the geometric shape that's carrying the weight of the form. As the light intermingles and mixes with the color, it does change it, and penetrates the space in a different way. I am trying to capture that ineluctable sense of light

that can't be pinned down. It's a phenomenon that sometimes isn't even present until it is on film.

ЛН: That's wonderfully described. It goes back to where we began, to your love of working with a physical set and with what happens in that space, in nanoseconds, when you're able to capture time. That is an attribute of photography that I'm hearing you say also has value.

I want to ask you two more questions, about video and about the ICA survey. So you mentioned video as being the most recent platform that you're utilizing. Could you say a little bit about why you moved in this direction? Was it organic? It probably was.

БК: Sure. That started in the 1980s as well. Working as long as I have, you do things and then you get distracted and go in other directions. Video has always been an interest, and now I have an opportunity to expand it. With video I can show temporarily the movement of my process, of my going back and forth in the set, merging light, form, and transparency until I capture a moment that isn't always visible.

In *Shadow Equals Light* (2010), I made a piece that was based on a light modulator kind of experience, using a pyramid prop I had made in the '80s. It was very simple but very satisfying, because it took away from the stillness and the idea of having a one-point perspective on things, allowing the pyramid to live its own life as it circulates. You get to see many aspects of this one form.

The next one, *Glass Curtain* (2011), involved refracting light, taking it and projecting it through the whole room, à la Zero Group. I knew that work; this was before the Zero show at the Guggenheim. I really could relate to that exhibit because I was doing similar things in this other piece. Now, the ICA work, *Axis* (2015), is stripped down to the actual architecture, so it becomes a component interacting with the video. It's not just a surface—it's about the actual physicality and structure of vernacular architecture rather than the image of architecture, which I have worked with previously.

Architecture really becomes part of the piece. There is a revolving exchange of surfaces and form between the

objects and the architecture. It questions the identity of each and offers a new combination of both. Several years ago, I videotaped a corner projection that morphed into a two-dimensional surface—it challenged one's visual experience of reality.

When I read *Kissing Architecture* by Sylvia Lavin, I was intrigued by its premise, which is so close to my video. Do you know the book?

ЛН: No, I don't.

БК: Lavin starts with Pipilotti Rist and discusses how she has taken these bland stretches of architectural wall and collapsed them in on themselves. It got me thinking about how I might manage to not use outside props anymore, but actually use the architecture.

In any case, architecture has always been with me, which is understandable because of all my geometric ideas. This piece for the ICA is a step away from what I've been known for, and it's going in a direction that I'm really excited to explore. It incorporates light and form, it incorporates translucency, it incorporates non-representational objectivity. It's a culmination of some of the ideas that I've been working with, but pared down to a specific kind of object—this Donald Judd-like object that's not a painting and not a sculpture, but a combination of both, which maybe again needs another definition.

Working with curator Alex Klein on the survey has given me a chance to see the work of many years positioned from vantage points that reinforce my beliefs. It is a fresh look at my own perspectives and potential. The ICA's support with a commission to make *Axis* also enabled me to develop ideas that I have been exploring with video. I'll be continuing with a new installation in New York—at Bortolami, in April. The survey has been an incredibly satisfying experience and I'm excited about the next "stage."