Leslie HEWITT

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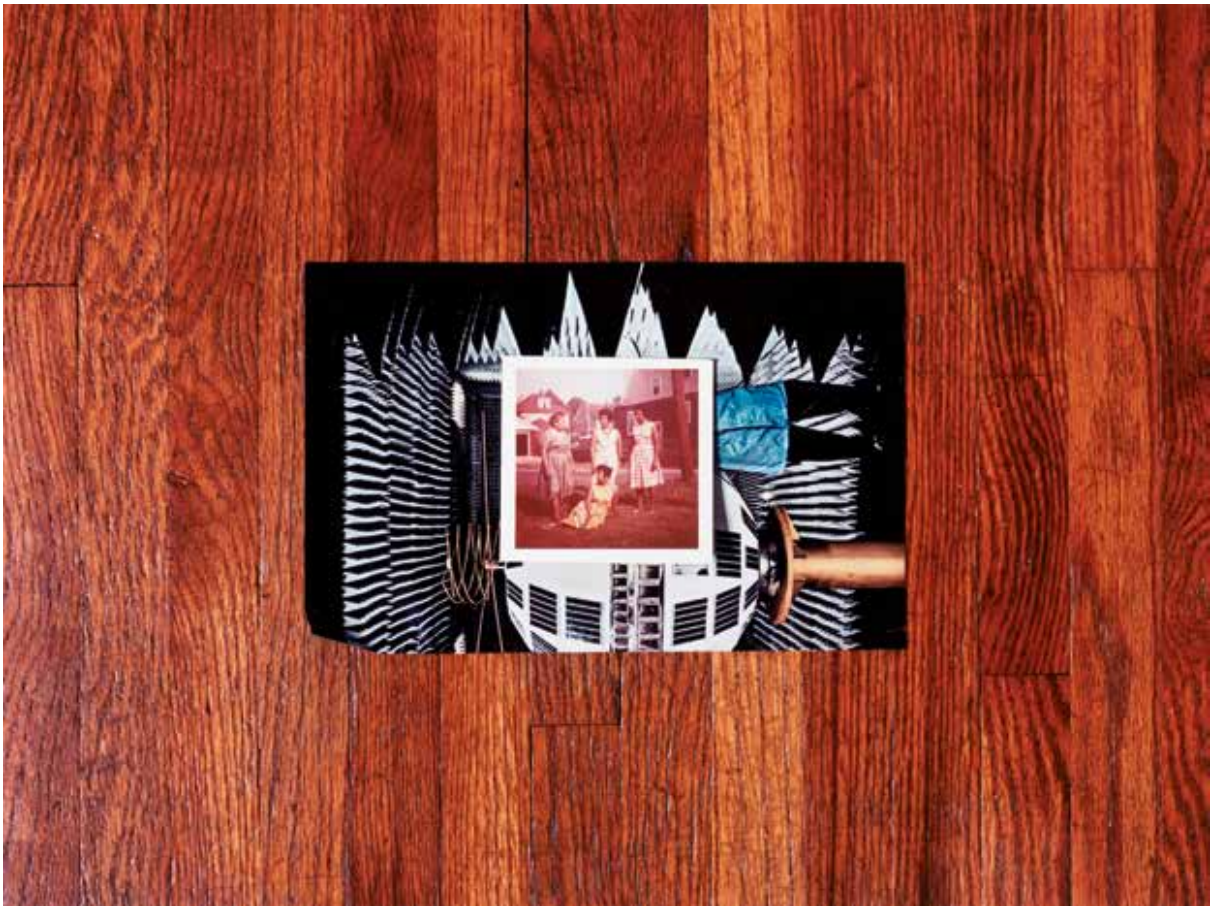
LESLIE HEWITT

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
Work by Leslie Hewitt in "Woman with a Camera" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, through Jan. 14, 2018.

Interview by Julia Wolkoff
Portrait by Grant Delin

IN THE STUDIO



Leslie Hewitt: *Riffs on Real Time (5 of 10)*, 2013, traditional chromogenic print, 30 by 40 inches.

LESLIE HEWITT'S fascination with memories, both personal and cultural, and the physical things that elicit them, is articulated in her abstract sculptures, assemblage-based photographs, and collaborative films. Layering her collection of worn books, vintage magazines, photographs, and other quotidian materials on wood planks or stacking them before a wall in her studio, Hewitt often constructs visual puzzles that tease out the relationships between images and objects, and then, through the impassive camera lens, examines how we construct meaning from such mixed components. These precise, minimal arrangements, with their diverse content, suggest many concurrent histories and experiences.

Recalling vanitas paintings, the series "Riffs on Real Time" (begun 2002) and "Still Life" (2013) feature still-life tableaux photographed in shallow spaces. Hewitt is committed to a material presence. The stringent geometrical alignment of the objects in these elegantly spare pictures deliberately holds the viewer at the surface. The photographs are often displayed in maple frames propped up against gallery walls; the crisp white paint and tactile woodgrains depicted in the shots mimic the typical white cube space, calling attention to the ultimate frame of the works—the commercial gallery or museum.

Hewitt's carefully selected personal items offer an oblique commentary on both individual and communal experiences of race, gender, and class. For example, Frantz Fanon's 1961 book *The Wretched of the Earth* sits in the center of the C-print *Topologies (Fanon mildly out of focus*), 2017. Beneath its dramatic black-and-orange cover, the dog-eared paperback, the lone object in the photograph, presents a searing psychological analysis of the effects of colonization.

Hewitt's hybrid approach to photography and sculpture, as well as her concern with the thornier aspects of American experience, was fostered by her graduate work in sculpture at Yale University and her fellowship in Africana studies and visual cultural at New York University, where she worked under photography historian Deborah Willis.

In 2012, after almost seven years of a nomadic existence participating in one residency after another, Hewitt moved her "mobile studio" into a two-room workspace on West 138th Street in Harlem, only a few blocks from where her grandfather once worked as a police captain. Both sets of Hewitt's grandparents settled in Harlem in the 1930s during the Great Migration. With an apartment close by, Queens-born Hewitt has fulfilled a long-held desire: cultural ancestry and family heritage linger in the present.

I interviewed the artist at her studio on an unusually fine day last December and again, at a café, on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. The bright, uncluttered studio space is, like her sparse works, contemplative and emotionally potent. As a former student of Leslie's at Barnard College, I was nervous to encounter my professor in the real world, but she proved to be as warm and gracious as I remembered her to be in the classroom.

JULIA WOLKOFF Your projects are formally composed and edited. I want to get a sense of your working process, a typical day in the studio.

LESLIE HEWITT Like many artists, I'm always working to find and continually refine a form of address, one that will aid in developing an idea from an immaterial status in my mind to a material existence as art. The process often starts out incongruent and irrational, and then goes through stages of logic. This imposed logic comes from my desire for structures that can help make sense of the chaotic nature of living, perhaps a kind of chaos theory.

WOLKOFF What are the steps to realize these structures in your work? Do you have assistants?

HEWITT I do, sometimes. But my studio practice is often post-studio; I conduct a lot of intensive research and exploration in archives, which is something I must do as an individual. Depending on how a project unfolds, I also collaborate with other artists. For big sculpture projects, I work with John Roche, an amazing sculptor and painter I studied with as an undergraduate at Cooper Union. He has a high level of craftsmanship that I admire. I also work with my artist friends like Carlos Sandoval de León—or William Cordova, who has an interest in geometric principles found throughout the history of art, particularly in the architectural forms of ancient American, African, and Asian civilizations. For lens-based work, I partner with photographer Julie Pochron and cinematographer Bradford Young. Relationships are a critical component of any art practice, although they are often overlooked or misrepresented.

WOLKOFF How did these collaborations come about?

HEWITT Isn't this normal, how artists work? Perhaps I should state more definitively: this is how I work. To believe that artists rely purely on a solo operation is extremely sad to me; that's not the reality, and it is not how artists are taught. At art school, students work in groups and spend generous amounts of time speaking about or interacting with the work of their peers. This is the model that I responded to as a young person, when I saw it exemplified by my mentors and by other artists that I admired. I was especially aware of it when I lived in Houston on a Core Program residency [2005–07]; I saw it in the artists who founded the social sculpture Project Row Houses.

WOLKOFF Do you remember how you were introduced to art?

HEWITT I am a native New Yorker, one who grew up in Queens. I went to the Met on school trips, and my dad really loved the Museum of Modern Art. My parents were of the Sixties and really cool. They had many friends who were artists, musicians, fashion designers, dancers, and photographers. They were curious people, very attuned to their time politically and socially.

WOLKOFF Your work often incorporates archival books and family photographs that suggest your upbringing had a political dimension. Did your parents talk to you about the social upheavals of that era—the antiwar, Civil Rights, Black Power, and women's movements, for instance?

HEWITT This probably sounds strange to say now, but home was a politicized space. Building a library was important to my parents. They collected books that told the history of African Americans from Reconstruction forward, books that you didn't have exposure

Untitled (Blue), from the series "Still Life," 2013, digital chromogenic print in custom maple frame, 52¼ by 62¼ by 6 inches.

"The technological components of mediation, reproduction, and distribution complicate corporeal memory in ways that are extremely fascinating and strange."

to in school. There were also many math and science books and, of course, important literary titles, but the social science section fascinated me the most as a child, perhaps because the narratives felt so distant and almost unbelievable to my young mind.

My mother attended the March on Washington in 1963. There was a documentary series about the Civil Rights struggle televised in the '80s called "Eyes on the Prize." My brothers and I would always watch it and try to find my mother in the crowd.

WOLKOFF Did you ever succeed?

HEWITT No! It's not possible. But that experience of scanning the television screen, the ritual of searching for that single figure, allowed me to pivot away from central characters, icons of the March like Martin Luther King Jr. I was able to explore the individual stories that create an invaluable support structure, a larger context. The March on Washington was organized by A. Phillip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, with the full participation of the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, which put pressure on the government to pass the long-awaited Civil Rights Act, a major advance in the ongoing struggle for equality in the United States. There's so much energy that comes out of that particular moment in time. The courageousness of it lingers.

Color Study_01, 2016, digital chromogenic print, 15 inches square.

Did the movement succeed? I grapple with that question a great deal, since it's clear that there are many unanswered injustices yet to come to account. The fact is that hegemony reasserts itself with very little effort and progressive values don't just flow freely from one generation to the next. We have to deal with where we grew up, what school we went to, whom we choose to love, or the music we consume or make. We have to work to implement concrete measures to ensure that we live in a truly cultured and equitable world.

WOLKOFF The interplay between memory and objects is a major concern in your practice, particularly in relation to how cultural experiences are conveyed over time. Where did that interest originate?

HEWITT My maternal grandparents died about a month apart when I was in the second grade. That made a really strong impression on me. I remember traveling to their home the day my grandmother died—she did not answer the door. Once we were inside, I looked around at everything because I thought that it would all disappear. At seven, I understood what death meant, but I also felt that I should record in my mind where everything was placed and try to memorize every detail, including the time of day. My fascination with the past definitely began there.

My research with professor Deborah Willis at NYU and my study of the works of Walter Benjamin, Stuart Hall, Allan Sekula, and Siegfried Kracauer helped me relate that personal story to the haptic and optical processes that structure our memories. The technological components of mediation, reproduction, and distribution complicate corporeal memory in ways that are extremely fascinating and strange.

WOLKOFF Your video installation *Untitled (Structures)*, which you produced with Bradford Young in 2012, was inspired by Civil Rights–era photographs in the Menil Collection archives in Houston. The piece comprises film footage you shot on location at historically charged sites in Memphis, Chicago, and New York. How does film complicate memory in this situation?

HEWITT I studied film theory at NYU, and I feel that the language of film criticism is connected to the conversations playing out formally in my work. Our culture often has amnesia. The documentary impulse fills a space, like a shorthand.

WOLKOFF People are asking a kind of Civil Rights–era question since the last presidential election—how does one prepare to resist a repressive government?

HEWITT This is a sobering time. If there's a stance that I could claim—one with a lineage based on survival systems developed by those who have struggled through the founding of this nation, the hypocrisy of slavery, the brutality of the Civil War, the horrors of Jim Crow, the criminal neglect of the Great Depression, the injustices addressed by the ongoing human rights struggle—it's to always be somewhat skeptical,

View of Leslie Hewitt and Bradford Young's installation *Untitled (Structures)*, 2012, 35mm film transferred to video, approx. 17-minute loop; at the Power Plant, Toronto. Photo Toni Hafkenscheid.

prepared, and disciplined, and, for one's sanity, to hold a deep relationship with creativity and beauty.

I heard a great post-election radio interview with the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates. A guy called in to ask, "Is there hope? Do you have any words of wisdom?" and Coates said firmly, "No." I actually found that quite liberating; it felt good just to hear someone say that out loud. It's going to be a struggle, and that's not a bad thing. Coates then added, "That's what your great-grandparents did. That's what your great-great-grandparents did. That's what your great-great-great-grandparents did. And if they hadn't struggled, you wouldn't be here."

WOLKOFF Your longer view of civil rights battles relates to your practice, which often deals with the fluidity of history and time. Do you remember how that theme first developed?

HEWITT An early work that I did at Cooper Union, for a class called "The Body and Memory," explored the phenomenon of the found object in the history of art. I found an old Brownie camera and welded a stand for it out of steel. In place of the film roll I put in paper tape that I wrote about my week on. It was like a concrete poem that cascaded out of the camera. Back then I wasn't thinking about these things, but now I see the connection with my current practice, and my interest in the relationship between text and image, or images as triggers for memory.

WOLKOFF What led you to photography as your primary medium?

HEWITT I would have to say the immediacy it produces, and what I like to call the "internal pull" of the photographic image, or what the photographer Dawoud Bey would call "subjective opticality." Photographs can generate the uncanny sensation of something being familiar yet unfamiliar, and create simultaneous feelings of horror and awe deep in your subconscious.

I grew up studying the work of famed music photographer David Ogburn. I explored the work of light sculptors like Roy DeCarava; the conceptual play in the collages of László Moholy-Nagy, John Baldessari, and Barbara Kasten, among others; and the examination of power and narrative in the photographic works of Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, and Andy Warhol. And I had the opportunity to work under Andrea Robbins and Max Becher as their assistant for a few projects.

WOLKOFF What impression did that experience make on you?

HEWITT Their works often track colonialism. Pivotally, I traveled with them to the Dominican Republic to photograph a community of German Jews and a community of Japanese people who had migrated there. I also went with them to Spain to work on their "Spaghetti Western" project, in which they mirrored classic film shots. In most of their works you think you're looking at one thing but then you read the text and it completely shifts your understanding.

WOLKOFF You continued your sculpture practice while a student in a cultural studies program at NYU, and described making "sculptural acts." What do you mean by that?

HEWITT I mean "act" as a shorthand for "action." I didn't have a permanent workspace, so I would set up a sculpture that I wanted to explore and document it for my own records. It started just as a form of notation. But I gradually began to see something in the photographs. I became more intrigued with the representation of the sculpture than with the sculpture as an object. Through the mediation of the camera I was able to avoid the impulse to fetishize the sculptures as physical objects; the photographic image transformed them into something new.

At the same time, I also fell in love with a lot of the Conceptual art of the 1970s. Many of these works you get to see only

View of the exhibition "Leslie Hewitt: Collective Stance," 2016, at SculptureCenter, New York. Photo Kyle Knodell.

through documentation, which inevitably becomes the artwork. For instance, I loved looking at the photographs of Gordon Matta-Clark's works, like the cut pier.

WOLKOFF Some of your series, like "Midday" (2009), have conflated Harlem, New York, with Haarlem in the Netherlands. I'm struck by your fascination with seventeenth-century Holland. I find a resonance between your photo-sculptures and the vanitas paintings from this period, famed for both their realistic detail and their symbolism. What drew you to this history?

HEWITT I'm not a painter, so I had to make sense of the still-life genre in another way. I became interested in optics, surfaces, and the rendering of light. That's why those works are so fascinating, right? Julie Hochstrasser's scholarship on still-life painting and international trade really influenced me. I applied for grants to travel to the Netherlands, where I got to do research at the Rijksmuseum, even examining Hochstrasser's notes. I began to reread Dutch still life through a sociopolitical lens. This artistic form emerged at the beginning of global capitalism and the intensification of our relationship to displaced objects, things we don't make ourselves.

WOLKOFF At the time, those luxury items—the cups, bowls, vases, and whatever else the Dutch were importing from all over the world—were so valuable that people would commission still lifes of the objects so they could further show off their material wealth.

HEWITT Yes, and their power.

WOLKOFF You engage, however, with the postcolonial. Your work often concerns the middle-class domestic sphere, seen through both a personal and a wider sociopolitical lens.

HEWITT I guess artists can't avoid an autobiographical tenor, but I try to reject it whenever I can. The snapshots that I choose to include in my works, for example, don't always depict my personal family, but they do show manicured lawns or other little hints that complicate the conventional notion of the black experience. This is in part an alternative view of the political idea that the middle class is shrinking, that there's a collapse of equality. I wouldn't say that my work is about that, but I want to make a formal connection.

Once I delved into why Dutch still life is such an important art historical genre, I asked myself, what is my counterpoint? It turned out to be technological. In recent years, we've been moving from material photographs, which you can print out and touch, to purely digital or virtual forms of representation. My counterpoint is that trend, coupled with what you might call the collapse of the still-life table. The still lifes I construct aren't cascades of abundance like those of the seventeenth century. Instead, they involve the compression and expansion of space in new ways evocative of our time.

"The fact is that hegemony reasserts itself with very little effort and progressive values don't just flow freely from one generation to the next."

WOLKOFF Several decades ago your photographs might not have read as sculptural, but now, as you suggest, the digital image has such primacy that the printed photograph offers a special kind of tangibility. Do you also work digitally?

HEWITT I'm not a purist, but I still photograph with film. I was taught that way, so I feel comfortable with it. I also enjoy the quality of film.

WOLKOFF But you're currently working on a Web-based project with Triple Canopy, right?

HEWITT Yes, it will be a part of their "Vanitas" issue. I'll continue my investigation of art and objecthood in the seventeenth century and their contemporary parallels. The project requires research at the Met as well as exploration of programming languages, architectural structures, and spatial maps.

WOLKOFF The Dutch Golden Age saw an increased emphasis on optical devices like the camera obscura. The artists of this time downplayed linear perspective in favor of empirical perspective, which prioritizes close observation and detail.

HEWITT I'm being ahistorical, but it's hard for me to view Dutch still lifes without thinking about how much they connect to photography. I'm interested in the history of technology. We invent things that shift our ways of seeing. Dutch paintings really manipulate light, and are arguably lens-based. So I am definitely drawn to this optical tradition.

But I am *not* a painter. I really, really stress that. The still-life tradition speaks to me, as an artist who uses photography, because of its relationship to memory, the simulacrum, and duplication. My interest centers on the lexicon, the symbols, the way in which the images are read. But I'm also very much fascinated with the brutality of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and Western colonialism, which is not directly pictured but haunts every single Dutch painting.

WOLKOFF It's very present in that era's material culture. The irony is that Europeans idolized East Asian goods and imports from other parts of the world, but their awe for these materials and techniques rarely if ever translated into a respect for the artisans and their cultures. It's wild, because these objects were *so* valuable.

HEWITT Cherished.

WOLKOFF But the people who made them were considered inferior. How can that be? It's difficult to imagine from today's perspective.

HEWITT Yes, it is. That contradiction also fascinates me. I'm hyperaware of it lurking within those paintings.

WOLKOFF Still life as a genre remains popular. I'm thinking particularly of flat lays on Instagram, which promote consumerism and material goods. What's unsaid is that many of those covetable clothes and objects were made halfway around the world, in factories with terrible labor conditions.

HEWITT Yes, yes, yes, exactly. I'm not like Mika Rottenberg, explicitly criticizing mass production or capitalism or this type of labor exploitation. But it would be fair to hold me accountable to the time I live in. I do intentionally use very ubiquitous things, like plywood. Most of our homes and structures are built with this material, and it is usually the least expensive. It pretty much structures our world. The other materials I use—books, photographs, or sometimes digital equipment—have their own symbolism and harsh realities.

WOLKOFF That goes back to the things that are left unsaid, that are maybe implied if you know the right history or context. You use very minimalist language in your work.

HEWITT Inference is essential. I select objects and arrange them to suggest different meanings without a directive or a didactic mode of address.

WOLKOFF You've mentioned the influence of female Minimalists and Post-Minimalists on your practice. Agnes Martin and Eva Hesse are having big institutional moments. The Guggenheim recently held a Martin retrospective, and Hesse's diaries were published last spring.

HEWITT Yes, I love that book. I'm not from an artist family. My mother studied math and my dad was a computer programmer. I was horrible in math. Or at least I thought I was, even though my mother to this day will tell me that I'm very good at it. She's supposed to say that. But I do gravitate toward systems and patterns. I find something strong, beautiful, and elegant—something delicate but at the same time resonant—about Agnes Martin's work. From my first encounter with her graph drawings, I found them really amazing; they're so technical but still have the human touch. They're warm, even though with less nuanced observation they could be seen as clinical or cool.

I also think about that in relation to Adrian Piper's work. Piper chooses a very cool and bureaucratic language for topics, such as oppression and dehumanization (i.e., racism), that are fraught with psychic pain. I love that contradiction. I learned from her practice how to treat certain subjects with emotional distance.

WOLKOFF Do you find that distance necessary to overcome gender stereotypes? Is it a protective impulse?

HEWITT I do maintain a strategic distance between my corporeal body and my work. We project certain concerns or feelings onto the body very easily.

WOLKOFF You may not be directly present in your photo-sculptures but your choice of objects and their placement is crucial.

HEWITT If there is anything in my work that does lend itself to the feminine, meaning my own body, it's my specific use of interiors. Though geometric and angular, they are womblike. And wombs, though in one sense so feminine, can also be shared spaces, which aren't gender specific. Almost all living entities have this important incubation period. The evidence of my presence is in the metadata: the selection, placement, and moment in which the event is captured and time-coded. ○