

PERROTIN

Leslie HEWITT

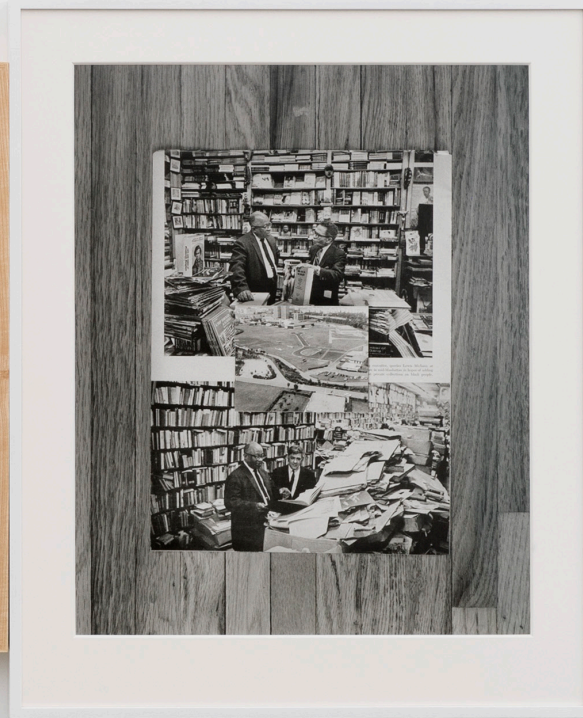
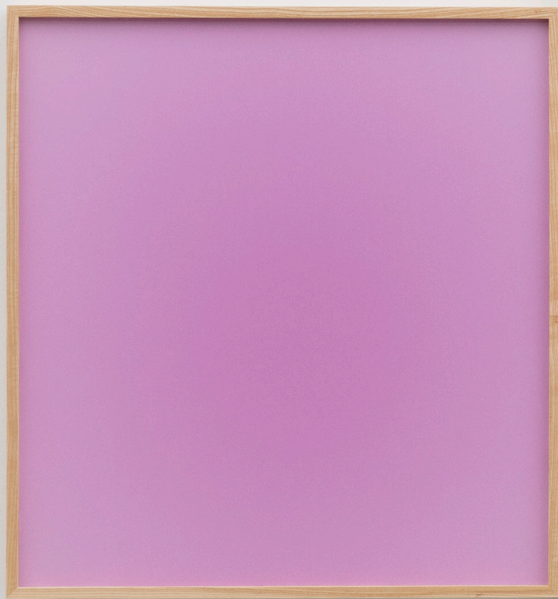
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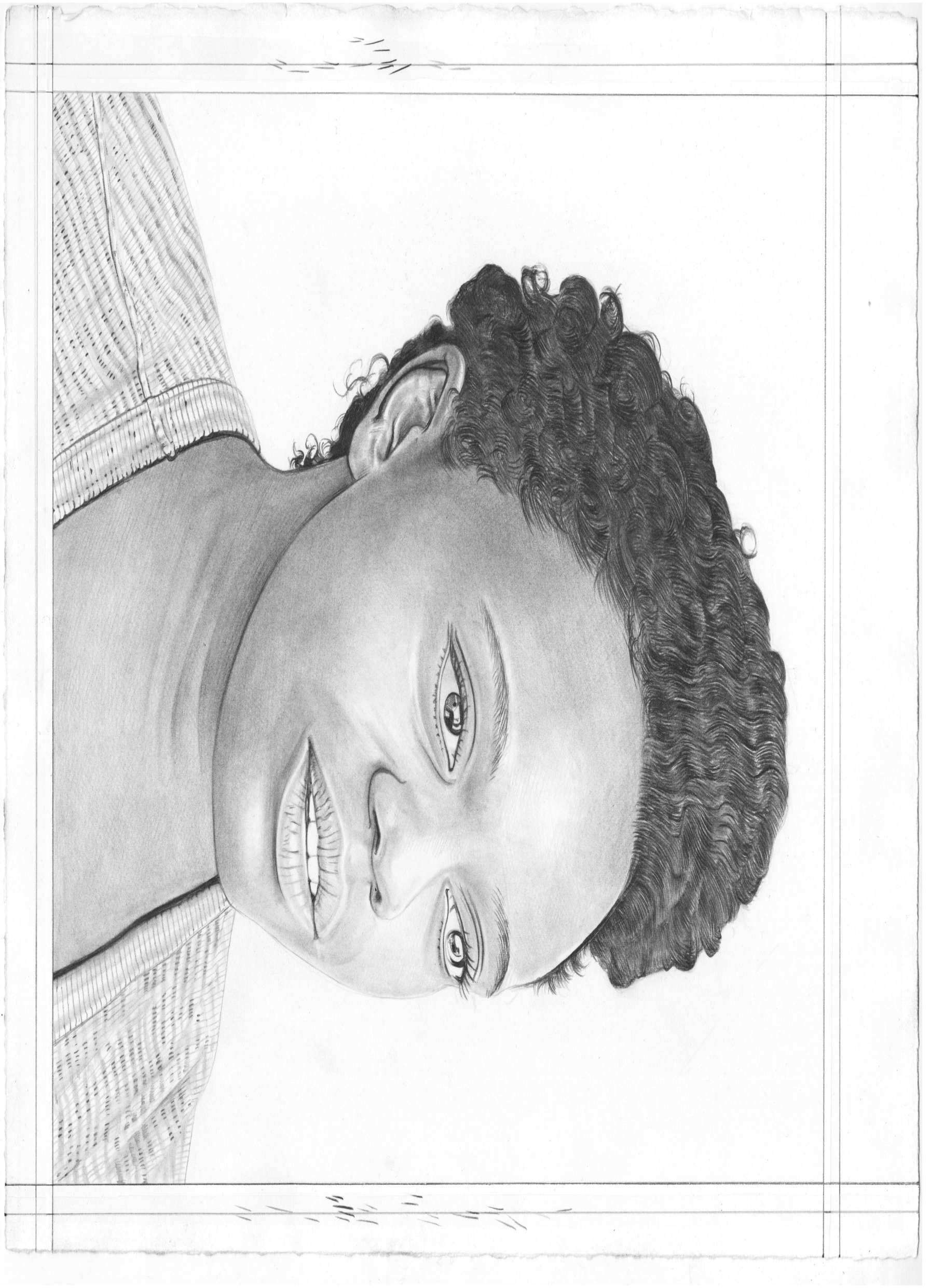
LESLIE HEWITT with Megan N. Liberty

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For 15 years, artist Leslie Hewitt has worked at the intersection of photography, sculpture, and installation, making works that complicate our understanding of space, time, history, and memory. Her work engages with a wide range of genres, disciplines, and histories including: 17th century Dutch still lifes, postwar Minimalism, 20th and 21st century literature, concrete poetry, mathematics, and computer programming languages. Her photographs, particularly her ongoing series “Riff on Real Time,” which has had numerous iterations since its beginning in 2002, both compress and expand time, layering together personal, political, and vernacular objects. Her series of photo-sculptures installed in wooden frames that rest on the floor and lean against the wall (such as “Make It Plain” [2006], “Midday” [2009–10], and “Spiral and Loop” [2019]), wall interventions, and untitled powder-coated, white-steel floor sculptures create a “choreographed geometry” that challenges how our bodies encounter art in the gallery space.

With her work currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Sculpture Milwaukee, and the Wallach Art Gallery’s Uptown Triennial, a project space, *Anatomy of a Flower and Other Studio Experiments* at Perrotin, NY, and her recent award of a Guggenheim Fellowship, Hewitt and I spoke about research, materiality, reading, abstraction, and collaboration as ongoing aspects of her practice, and the way in which the study of individual objects questions our notions of and relationship to history.

MEGAN N. LIBERTY (RAIL): I came up with some terms and phrases that reoccurred while reading and thinking about your work. I thought we could move through those terms as a way to generate conversation. The first is research. Your practice itself draws on your own research, but also the works themselves illustrate this research and research materials as physical objects.

LESLIE HEWITT: My understanding of what it means to be an artist pretty much entails a studio practice that connects to the space of ... hmm, I’m trying not to use the word “research” intentionally, but “experimentation” seems more appropriate. In experiments, there’s trials, there’s also different temporalities, of moving something through a process of development—probity is also a term that I want to use. But research is different based on the discipline that you’re in. I’m an artist who doesn’t claim it as material. But it is a process in proximity that I am deeply connected to. I was guided to attend as an art school, the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art—and now teach there—alongside schools of architecture and engineering, which have very different notions of studio or lab space. The experience revealed an interest in history embedded within my open concerns of art and art praxis. I’m not a historian, I’m trained as an artist who is interested in the narratives, the telling, the accounts, that circulate within historical narratives. It does require for me at times a commitment to different modalities in the work, moving at varying rates. And in that mental space, I’m accumulating more and more perspectives and through the studio process, some form that can contain all of those questions and curiosity’s blossoms.

RAIL: Something else I was interested in is how history becomes very malleable in your work, whether it’s stable or unstable, layering and collage as formal principles also allow you to play with the temporality of how we think about history and historic events as fixed or unfixed events.

HEWITT: History seems like it should be dry and matter of fact but is often full of absurdities and hard to reckon with accounts, because of all of the things that aren’t said but that you know are there. So, what else is there to fill that space? For me, the beauty in art is in that capacity to fill that space with all of the other aspects of our human existence.

RAIL: You’ve talked before about your interest in 17th century Dutch still lifes and this idea of taking objects out of context and just showing them as aesthetic things, which kind of takes them out of history for a moment, which is, of course, impossible. We’re always enmeshed in history. But kind of changing that context and placing the objects in a different context allows us to change the temporality; allows us to think about where they are historically and ahistorically.

HEWITT: I have an interest in the methodology of “historical materialism” to a certain degree. The history of art and artifacts and their art’s contexts that was initially exposed too often left me with a wanting feeling, I felt like there was more there, a desire for a deeper intertextuality.

RAIL: Still lifes are extremely political, which you’ve talked about, but that narrative is definitely not as engaged within art history, in art school,

and in the general understanding of what still lifes are.

HEWITT: Right. They are strictly formal at times, but they reveal so much about what time period they were made in, indirectly. And that process of inference is extremely fascinating to me. The story of how certain objects enter into the Vanitas array, these perhaps more religious or symbolic readings of such works, with a kind of moral or ethic that's implied through the cultural significance of those objects. But the literal objects are telling a very different story if we position them within the space of the beginnings of global capitalism and trade. I'm not interested in retelling that story in particular, but more so open to circulating within the sphere of what we value, the concept of the cornucopia or the notion of access through extraction, excess also comes to mind, or pretty much the cacophonous of it visually, also the compression of labor into things... consumable things, what does that say? You know, and of course, there are other more insidious still lifes where you do have figures, ghostly black figures in the background, or these kinds of laboring bodies that are also being brutally traded as objects or their labor unaccounted for. So, there is that.

In my contemporary moment, I want to claim art historical proximity to the still life genre by actively naming many of my photographic works "Still Life," especially the leaning photo sculptures, like "Spiral and Loop," to expand yet circle back to this complex and rich history.

RAIL: One of the other terms I've been thinking about is materials or materiality. In the context of what you've said about how still lifes represent or ask us questions about value, it's interesting to think about the materials that you both physically and metaphorically place into your compositions—wood, carpet, paperbacks, photographs, fruit. All of those things have specific histories as materials and references, the personal touch points they represent. *Riffs on Real Time (2 of 10)* (2012–17) in your *Reading Room* show at Perrotin, uses a tear sheet from *Ebony* magazine, with the history and value of that magazine, and what is represented in the image. The materials are both physical but also representative of different complicated values.

HEWITT: I think that for a long time, I would say that I misused the technology of the camera, or the opticality of the camera, because I often point the lens towards something that light cannot penetrate or a scramble of sorts in the viewer's perception because of the metanarratives at play both literally and figuratively. Wood as a central material in my photographic work acts as both surface, but it's also representative of a kind of density, a refusal. When I first started working this way, it was very confusing and perplexing to people. For me, it was about the process of mediation, in addition to staying in that suspended space of making sense of what it means to process what it is that you're looking at. Being in that space of suspension, of liminal space—it's not only that surface, right? It's that it's that material, juxtaposed or collaged in relation to or with another material, to use this language, not that I don't use it, but you know, normally collaging is two-dimensional.

RAIL: It's worth mentioning as well, that you're physically arranging these objects in your studio, not digitally altering them. These are physical photographs, pieces of wood, books—actual materials that you're stacking and arranging.

HEWITT: And documenting, and then documenting that process. I see it as a negotiation with the viewer. If you expect to see something, there's something that blocks you—at first—and then repositions the gaze, right? The work is about perspective, opticality, and phenomenology. In our space of automation, we've already outsourced processing to external devices, which is why I think my approach manifests the internal free-associative process to a visual, annotative, and physical trace.

The camera—and photography—for me, conceptually, is such an elaborate place that can intersect all of those things, both psychological, you know, as well as physiological and we understand the world through our senses, it's not only optical, our memory contains all of that data: how something smells, how it felt. I photograph hoping to call up those other sensory modes that often cannot be pictured, but I try to get as close as possible.

RAIL: Our memory is also physical, imprinted on us bodily as well. You've talked before about the confluence of the image and the application of sculpture and how you bring those two together, and that sculpture evokes a certain bodily response, there's a way in which your works, by changing the way our bodies engage with photographs, you're kind of rewriting our memory of what a photo is supposed to be, or how a photo makes us feel, or how an image plays a role in the physical experience of it.

HEWITT: Completely. This is the entanglement of art.

RAIL: It ties back to this idea of history, whether it's fixed or unfixed, whether it's static or malleable, and how memory and history are imprinted on us.

HEWITT: I would say memory is malleable and unfixed. But I think history pretty much is, and it doesn't mean that it can't be addressed or redressed, in a sense. That's the role of historiography. History is not all encompassing. That's why we have to constantly address it, because power and agency are always at play in history. There will be moments where multiplicity is not present, because there's a kind of essentializing or compression, or violence of erasure, which is, in and of itself historic.

RAIL: That's a very important distinction I'm glad you made. I am also thinking about history as a discipline. You mentioned earlier that at Cooper Union, you were working alongside architects and engineers, and you've talked about mathematics before and the role that these structures play in your work, the relationship of structures and mathematics, but also geometry. In *Reading Room*, you paired these large bodily photo sculptures with very elegant, slim, steel, white, folded sculptures—almost like folded sheets of paper—that are also very bodily and relational, but extremely geometric. That was a very powerful pairing for me.

HEWITT: I also hope that the way that we think about and understand art in our particular moment

can hold all of these complexities, and that its form should constantly evolve and grow and not only replicate what was. Mathematical thinking, in my mind, moves towards a universal language. It isn't owned by any particular discipline or history or culture in fact. I'm not in the practical-use space of mathematics, but more so fascinated by some of these patterns that are recognizable in life through the study of certain mathematical principles, like calculus for example. The untitled steel sculptures follow a very particular logic in all of my works, right, so with all of my works I set a form or logic, and I play it out in variables. Now I'm specifically using mathematical terms loosely here. I am very much interested in finding some of those principles, finding those patterns, learning about them, having a relationship to them, but also understanding them in a way that connects them to play and a sense of freedom, in seeing them in real tangible, physical forms. It ends up being embedded in the work and really it should be seamless, it should become invisible, not instructional or didactic in any way, shape, or form. When I construct any work or think about it in the context of an installation, I'm always playing with those principles, or patterns, because we also live in those systems and patterns in ways that I think we, you know, sometimes separate ourselves, right, from a larger ontological formations, like temporal, spatial, epistemological, performative, and corporeal set of relations.

Buildings are structures, as are maps, and we constantly are in a grid of sorts, depending on where you live, but definitely in New York City, we exist in a grid every day. And we somehow think that we have so much liberation in that grid [*laughs*], which we do at times, I guess. In a similar way, I always create something that breaks with a system, slightly but with great intention. There's always a "hack," interruption, or disruption—there's always something that doesn't close the system. I am interested in forms that open it up for possibility and renewal. And for me, that's the invitation to wonder, to speculate, to have this destabilizing or freeing moment with a work of art. Even for the large steel floor sculptures, the principle of that work includes a rejection of containment. The works should never be parallel to the walls that contain it. And that's also true for any of my photographic works. There's always a pointing to what's out beyond, that there's a beyond that actually falls outside the frame.

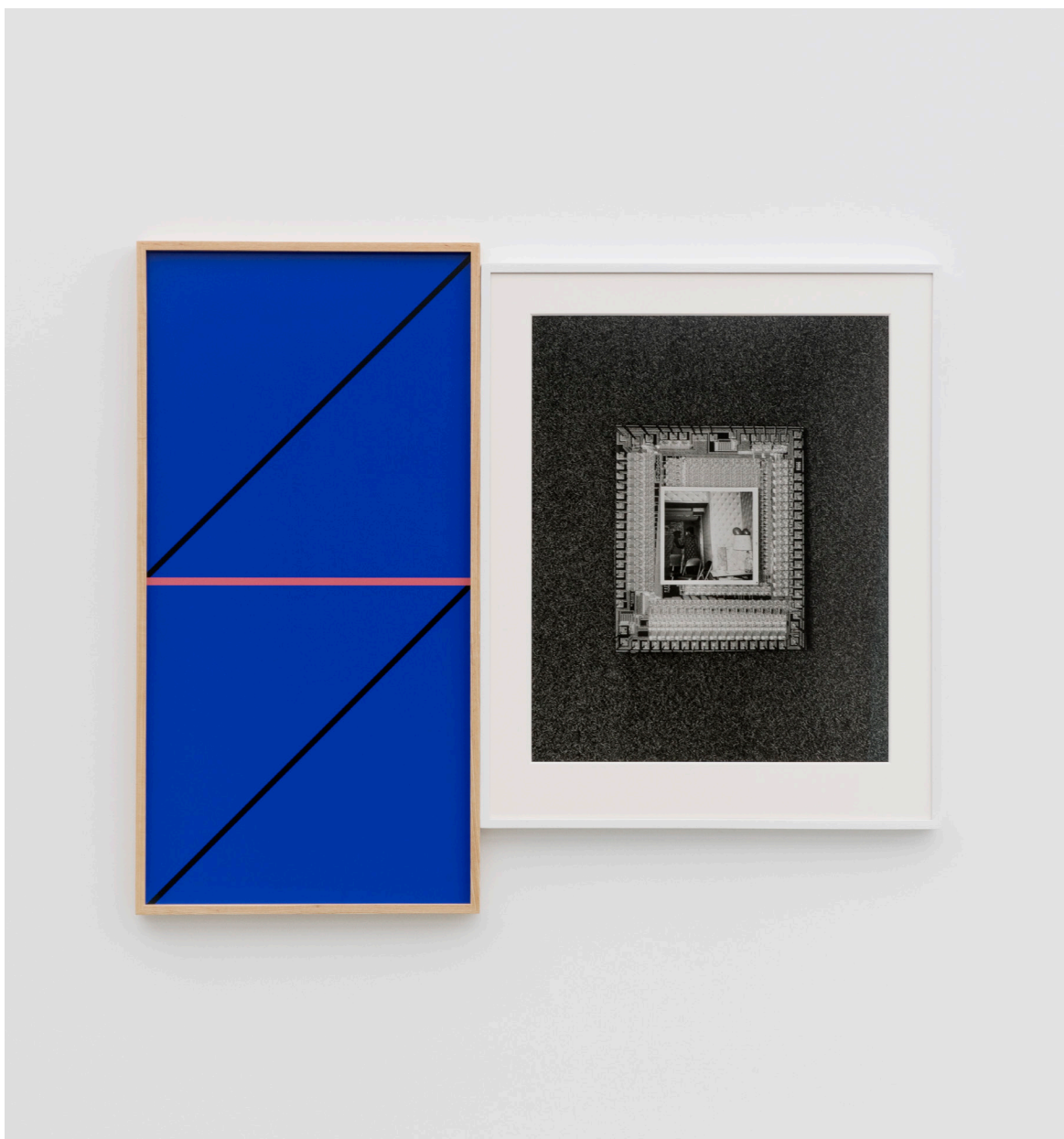
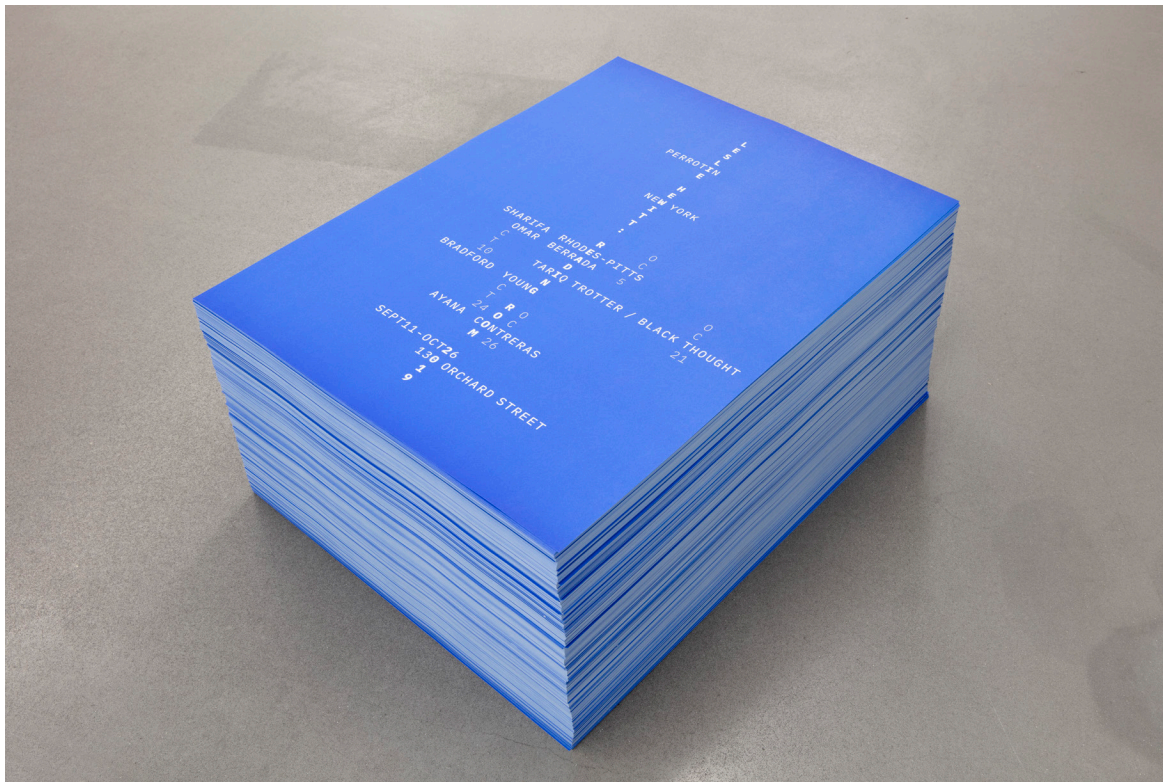
RAIL: The pairing of the steel sculptures and the photo sculptures emphasizes the abstraction and the geometry of the photographic works as well. Sometimes we're given access to the book's spine, but in other cases we're not. It is a physical object we're trained to engage within a certain way, but it's also a beautiful shape and color. The more overtly geometric abstract works, and the slightly more narrative, figurative works like the still lifes have those same properties as well.

HEWITT: Yes. That is true.

RAIL: A small gesture creating a full reorientation.

HEWITT: Yes.

RAIL: To bring another discipline into this conversation, you used the phrase "choreographic geometry" in the description of *Reading Room*, which brings to mind dance and mathematics coming



Top: Throughout the duration of *Reading Room*, Leslie Hewitt invited friends, colleagues, and thought partners to activate the space in a series of semi-public gestures in response to the notion of a collective archiving with curator/writer Omar Berrada, DJ/collagist Ayana Contreras, historian/writer Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, cinematographer Bradford Young, and musician Tariq Trotter/Black Thought. Photo Credit: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin

Below: Leslie Hewitt, *Riffs on Real Time with Ground (Mirror Blue with Black Diagonal and Horizon Daybreak)*, 2018. Digital chromogenic print, silver gelatin print, 114.3 x 137.2 | 45 x 54 inch. Photo Credit: Guillaume Ziccarelli, courtesy the artist and Perrotin.

together, our bodies being choreographed to move around these objects in a specific way.

HEWITT: I guess my introduction to art was actually through dance. When I was young, I studied dance, ballet, modern dance, but also jazz and West African dance. It was a rubric for so many histories and sealed my interest in history, that history can be embedded in other things other than words or objects but move through modes of transformation that carry emotion and energy.

RAIL: In the body.

HEWITT: In the body. And when you think of most diasporic or nomadic communities of human existence—storytelling, oral traditions—there are other ways that history locates itself beyond material and physical presence. I’m giving an analysis to this now, but at the time, it was not that. And so, when I left that form of art making, I think I brought a lot of that sensibility, that bodily awareness, that muscle memory. I am not a dancer, but it is in me (I am a dancer), and I think that gave me a way to engage with sculpture and a way to understand the art movement of Minimalism, and many conceptual works from the mid-20th century as well.

RAIL: It connects to another important aspect of your work, which is the archive, thinking about histories and archives that are not housed in these traditional structures, other ways of sharing an archive, embodied archives, oral traditions, these kinds of practices. Your work both incorporates the archive into your process, but also in making the work, builds its own separate archive, and also reflects critically on what an archive is, has historically been, and can be in the future. I keep coming back to *Riffs on Real Time (2 of 10)* in *Reading Room* with the *Ebony* magazine page.

HEWITT: It became really critical in preparing for how all of those works in *Reading Room*, “Riffs on Real Time,” “Spiral and Loop,” and the untitled steel sculptures, would rest in the context of Perrotin, and its pedestrian level. There’s something about Delancey Street, walking around the area it has a really a different vibe.

RAIL: That location has a very rich history in the Lower East Side community, and how it has changed over the years. It makes sense that would be such an exciting space to activate.

HEWITT: I wanted to build the show where you could come in any entrance. You could begin in the bookstore, or you could start with one section of the gallery, move through *Spiral and Loop*, and then end in the bookstore. So that kind of circulation was really important, which meant to a certain degree that I needed to appropriate the commercial aspect of the bookstore, to nullify it a little, to claim that space conceptually, call it a “reading room,” in addition to the title of overall show *Reading Room*. And technically, if we think about a reading room traditionally within the context of a library or a specialty like a rare bookstore, or archive, there’s a table, gloves, pencils, and a book that is brought to you. So, this was not that. The reading is just a conceptual refrain in the space. But I wanted to honor and collapse space in the context of varying immigrant/migratory and cosmopolitanism narratives of New York. I wanted to call up another densely layered location on the island of Manhattan—Harlem. For

that particular *Riffs on Real Time (2 of 10)*, that second layer is the interior of the African Memorial Bookstore in Harlem (1932–74). It’s an interior image—not the classic image of that bookstore—from a section of *Ebony* magazine that interviewed Lewis Michaux, the owner of that bookstore and also a self-taught archivist who built that collection. We could look at that now and not see the level of audacity that was needed for him to claim that intellectual space, to claim ways of connecting a diasporic narrative across the Atlantic, and across the Americas; that was a pretty radical claim in the early part of the 20th century. What was really breathtaking for me, in those images within *Ebony* magazine, was just the accumulation was immense. It was almost like, glacial, almost an archaeological site, I thought, to myself, “Whoa, the impact and weight of history.” And then for *Riffs on Real Time (2 of 10)* I place a snapshot on top of a heliport scene from a very different scale and scene. It was important that the work touched to the extent in which those sites of intellectual collectivity were also highly surveilled. And in the end, you know, disrupted. This is pretty devastating, really.

RAIL: Your program piece *Forty-two (2019)* also uses the National Memorial African Bookstore as source material. I wanted to bring up a quote from your 2016 show at the Sculpture Center, where you had films on view that you made with Bradford Young. In the pamphlet for that you had a conversation with him where you discussed metadata. You were already thinking about metadata as this kind of embedded part of your images. Then ultimately in 2019, you created a work that in a lot of ways is itself a visualization of metadata. But

also, the language you’re using to describe this specific “Riffs on Real Time” image and the conceptual framing of your *Reading Room* show, is very evocative of your more recent work, *Anatomy of a Flower (2018)*, which was commissioned for the Carnegie International, that has so much to do with viewpoints: pedestrian pathways, aerial views, these specific vantage points with which we engage with historical institutions and spaces. I want to make sure we come back to the connection between these works.

HEWITT: Part of *Reading Room* was to resist the singularity of an artist’s voice in the sense that I obviously author, the work that I’m making includes authors, includes works of other authors, literally, as well as other people’s things that I borrow for the purpose of photographing as an event or an encounter. *Reading Room* gave me an opportunity to invite other artists who work with history as a way of thinking, as a material, as a process, into the space. I wanted to circle back to *Reading Room* because that notion that references are embedded within other references, that are embedded within other references, like it creates this dense material that relates to this notion of metadata, brought up in an interview context with artist, cinematographer, and collaborator Bradford Young.

RAIL: Metadata has such a digital association, even though it’s a cataloguing strategy, essentially. I like thinking about the term as more analog, as being tied to cataloguing and archives.

HEWITT: I will push back a little bit because anything that moves into strict automation, if you trace it back, it turns back to a body, the labor of an action

and the compression of time and space. The word “meta” is interesting to me, a referent to within, and I also make an association with it as a parallel to the word “interiority.” I know this does not directly address archives, but I think staying on the word metadata for a while may prove to be more and more important as we move deeper into the 21st century and further and further into a dematerialized world.

Specifically, in the HTML program *Forty-two*, this idea of something being “meta,” and then also “data,” data is information, and it’s not necessarily knowledge until we’ve gone through our own processes of making sense of that data or information. The word came up with Bradford because, most people don’t get into the granularity of what it means to build an image, but a cinematographer does that, photographers do it, but cinematographers really do it. Each scene often relies on a crafting of the metadata, all those little elements, the building and the constructing of the image itself. But the HTML program, I would argue, it’s a bit different, to create a machine that could generate language in a poetic register. And part of that meant giving it a set to work with that went through my process of looking at images, writing down my reading of those images, my formal analysis of those images, my free association of those images, that gave the program a grounding in a human condition and temporality.

RAIL: What images were you looking at?

HEWITT: I worked with images of the National Memorial African Bookstore from *Ebony* magazine, Google search, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Installation view of Leslie Hewitt’s *Reading Room*, Perrotin, New York, September 11 – October 26, 2019. Photo Credit: Guillaume Ziccarelli, courtesy the artist and Perrotin.



RAIL: Thinking about the way the language visually appears, drawing on the legacy of concrete poetry, it appears in a kind of crossing. It connects to the geometry of your other work.

HEWITT: Well, I hope so, I am open to that.

RAIL: The letters appear in this open space. It relates to your other work, for example your photo sculptures, and the idea that you set these formal structures for building your work, but you don't tell us what they are, and eventually, we're able to see the structure through repetition.

HEWITT: Yes, for that work, what was so important was the process of reading, using a photographic paradigm to make that work. I'm obsessed with that instant of documenting something, which is then (almost instantaneously) the immediate past. So, it's a representation of the second before, it's almost indiscernible, the difference between now and two minutes ago. In *Forty-two*, there is a timestamp, and I left the cursor as a quotidian gesture.

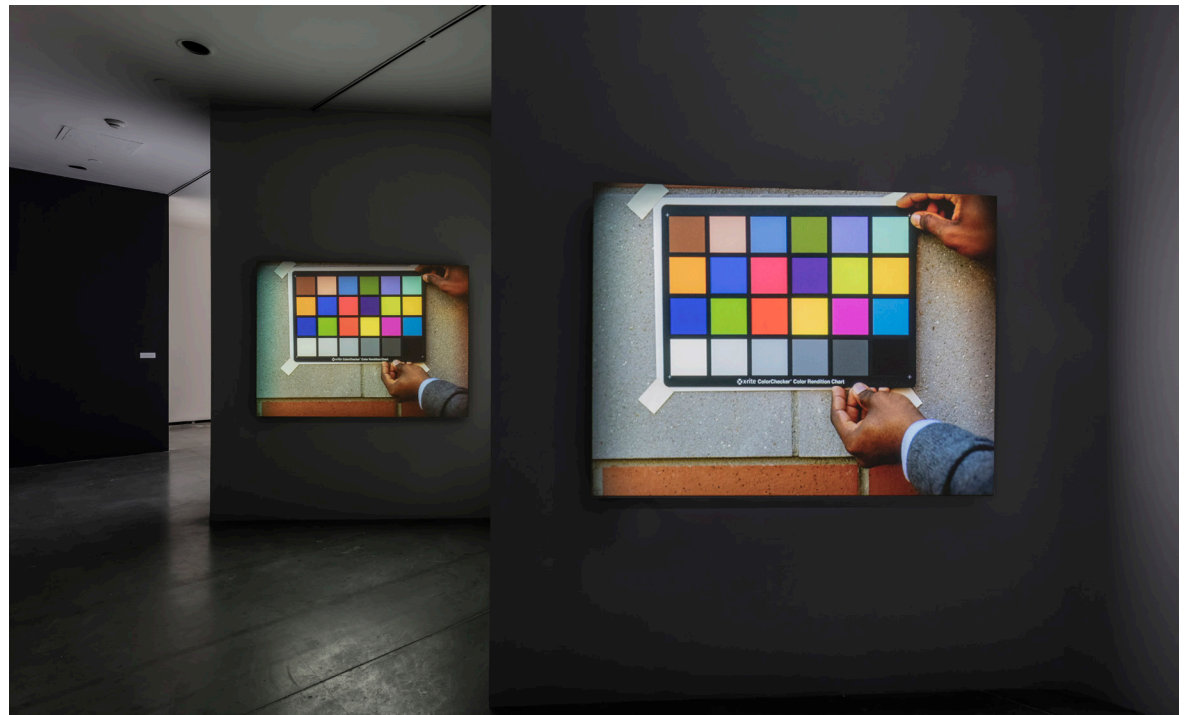
Riffs on Real Time (2 of 10) (2006–09), from the earlier iteration of that series, has a sheet with the programming language PL/1 on it. I grew up in a household of people who are more in the hard sciences, my father was a programmer and my mother studied math and minored in music. I was talking about this with the artist Sara VanDerBeek, who's a friend, and just thinking about the generation of image makers from that latter part of the 20th century into the 21st. What does it mean to consider the dematerialization of the object, when we've all resigned ourselves, even right now, in the space of the pandemic to mediation and automation?

RAIL: Yeah, like what you were saying before that nothing is really fully automated.

HEWITT: It's an abstraction. We're only getting the interface, but behind it there's language, programming language that most of us don't know. But it's responsible for pretty much the way in which we navigate and understand the world. This is both exciting and terrifying. And we use these interfaces as if they're natural and neutral ... I'm still thinking about this. There were moments in the *Reading Room* where *Forty-two* was playing, where it seemed to align somehow, with what the invited *Reading Room* participant for that particular *Reading Room* program was leading with—it was uncanny and beautiful.

RAIL: Your work, *Anatomy of a Flower*, for the Carnegie International is not as much about time, but is sort of reflecting on the way in which we encounter spaces on these different viewing or optic levels. The three parts of the work are: “panoptic,” which seemed to be more aerial views; “pedestrian,” which connects to your earlier point about wandering into a bookstore and countering the gallery space; and “innermost,” which shows the inner workings of the institution. It is interesting that your language about earlier works so much echoed this new project that you recently finished.

HEWITT: Even beginning “Riffs on Real Time,” I had a clear sense of what I wanted each layer of those images to do, and realized that it was a kind of treatise, if you will, on an optical engagement. I keep referencing, even in the context of our conversation



Leslie Hewitt in collaboration with Bradford Young. Installation view of *Stills* (2016) from *Collective Stance* at The Power Plant, Toronto, Canada and The Sculpture Center, Long Island City, New York. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin.

here, how to expand a form that compresses. How does it compress to begin with and how to expand nonetheless? I have worked on this idea of layers since 2002, thinking about three-dimensionality in the context of a two-dimensional plane, or a device that compresses the fullness of life into a two-dimensional image/object, the camera. *Anatomy of a Flower* actually did not exist in physical space in the context of the museum. It plays out as a long and steady intervention. There's a belatedness built into this project, an asynchronous (an important word in the space of the pandemic) mode of addressing the museum and the exhibition itself as a classification system of sorts, being in the site of the catalog, which is what I considered as an intervention into that space of the exhibition as a document. This was the first phase of this work, this way of thinking or leaving a trace of such thoughts. And now, there is another formation, *Anatomy of a Flower* as an object of display and study.

RAIL: You've done other interventions in books before, for example, in Matt Keegan's *OR* (2016), you had a postcard. For the Carnegie catalogue, the texture of the pages that *Anatomy of a Flower* appears on is different than the other pages, and it's about half an inch shorter on the edges.

HEWITT: Yes, Matt Keegan is a dear friend. He has invited my participation in many of his publication projects over the years and we collaborated on an exhibition, *From You to Me and Back Again*, in 2006 at WallSpace, which included a small publication with an artist I admire greatly, Michael Queenland. I also want to mention artist William Cordova, my collaborator on many projects over the years, including our 2004 Yale University intervention titled, *I Wish It Were True*, an archive of dubbed films installed as a monolith in front of the Chapel Street Gallery. William has always pushed me to reconsider form and process as intervention in and of itself, when all of the elements are balanced. In terms of an intervention for the Carnegie International, part of my gesture was to show the impossibility, I feel, of veiling aspects of the encyclopedic museum and the methods and theories of collecting that shape it. I often have questions about, and frankly cannot unsee, the taxonomies of museums. I can't unsee, or perhaps remove from my mind, the kind of artifacts that many museums

contain in private or on display. They echo in formal ways throughout the architecture of the museum. I brought many of these larger questions with me as I approached the work as an intervention. It's kaleidoscopic really. The name of this work, *Anatomy of a Flower*, references an attempt to address the intricacies of something that we think of as delicate or fragile, but is in fact a complex and powerful system.

MEGAN N. LIBERTY is the Art Books Editor at the *Brooklyn Rail*. Her interests include text and image, artists' books and ephemera, and archive curatorial practices.