

CENTER for EXPERIMENTAL LECTURES

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<http://experimentallecures.org>

What Is A Document?

by Chelsea Knight

So hi everyone! My name is Chelsea Knight and I was a resident at Shandaken for two weeks this summer, during which time I spent a lot of time up here at the sculpture park thinking about some of the work and wanting to put together a sort of tour that talks about some of the work in a different kind of way than maybe what you're used to. While we're doing this—it should last about 45 minutes to an hour—I encourage you to speak up, talk about your thoughts, and participate. However, it would be great if you do wanna speak that you come up and use the microphone, so don't be intimidated, it's really fun, it's called a zumba kit, this thing.

So I wanted to start by talking a little bit about this Louise Nevelson sculpture, it's a sculpture from 1983, and it's called "City on a High Mountain." I think this sculpture is the apotheosis of abstraction. It's an abstraction that implies an absolute simplification and reduction within a language of well-balanced purity. It has extraordinary formal intensity, as you can see. The first time I saw it, a couple of weeks ago, I fell in love with it. It is a visionary work, and one of the most original. It's actually one of a kind. It's a sophisticated composition of austere dignity. I think that it's sublime, almost transcendent, it's distinctive, disinterested, gratuitous, hmmm, sober, clear...perfect. It's perfect. I hope that you agree with me. It's so far away from the way that ordinary people think about their ordinary lives. This is art. This is culture.

Nevelson challenged the vision of what type of art women would be creating with her dark, masculine, and totem-like works. Nevelson believed that art reflected the individual, not masculine/feminine labels, and chose to take on her role as an artist, not specifically a female artist. Reviews of Nevelson's work in the 1940's wrote her off as "just a woman artist," a review of her 1941 exhibition at Nierendorf gallery stated, "we learned the artist is a woman in time to check our enthusiasm. Had it been otherwise, we might have hailed these sculptural expressions as by surely a great figure among modernists."

When asked by a feminist art journal if she suffered from sexism in the art world, Nevelson replied—

Martine Syms, in the audience: "I am a woman's liberation"

Can you say that louder?

Syms: "I AM a woman's liberation!"

Thank you Martine! Those texts that I just spoke, the first was from Andrea Fraser's "May I Help You?" from 1991, maybe some of you are familiar with it. She's talking about Allan McCollum's work, and what's interesting about that, in the second text about masculinity was from Wikipedia, and the quote also about checking our enthusiasm. I feel like I wanna talk about stuff while we're doing this tour. I want us to, like, analyze what's happening while it's happening. So I tell you that I spoke Andrea Fraser because what I think she is doing is an act of authentic mystification, so she's kind of doing a love dance with Allan McCollum's work that I'm appropriating to talk about Louise Nevelson, but she's essentially mystifying, which is a John Berger term, for those of you that ever took like, art history 101 and saw that amazing youtube video if you didn't read the book, John Berger *Ways of Seeing*. He's talking about some ideas from Walter Benjamin's work, and he talks about mystification as this idea of what happens when we lose the context for an art work or lose the artists voice within that, and we are given over to whoever holds cultural capital, and whoever has the power of language to write and be art historians and write about the work.

With that said, the best thing that we can do here today, I think, is if we collectively talk about the work, and I'd love to open it up and ask some of you to give your interpretations or any other factual information that you may have or any insights that you're thinking about. Anyone? If you don't wanna use the mic you can shout really loud. Nobody has any thoughts on this "apotheosis of abstraction?"

Oh, Jess, how about you? Why don't you come up?

Jess: Well, this Louise Nevelson, um, I guess I would say that it's timeless. That it's really beyond words, it speaks for itself. So there's nothing more to say.

Chelsea: Thanks. Well, I guess...come on guys, really, I mean, I memorized that whole Andrea Fraser text. Nobody can talk about what this work is to them? Oh yeah, right here, great!

Audience member: When I first saw this work just now, I was starting to hate on it because I thought it was by a male artist, now I feel a little bit embarrassed. I still don't like it, but I'm trying to make myself like it cause you told me it was by a female artist, and I feel like it kind of manipulates with, and interferes and bulldozes the landscape in a way that I don't appreciate, but I'm trying to forgive that because it's by a female artist. I'm having an inner essentialist struggle because I know information about this sculpture that's making me un-judge it.

Chelsea: Thank you, very candid, brave statements. Well, I think what we're gonna do is just traipse around the hill—don't worry we're not gonna do any long walks today, but I would like to go head over towards the Lynda Benglis sculptures because those are not permanent and will be coming down, and I wanna just like, touch on them. So please, join me.

I actually had a dream the other night, I've been having all these object-oriented dreams, and I was, like, thinking about these sculptures because someone bludgeoned me with this Lynda Benglis pink thing over here, I thought it was a vase, and someone came, I'll call them "Blank," and they came and tried to murder me, and I picked it up and they grabbed it out of my hand, so I'd love if you guys could start thinking about any recent dreams that you've had that have to do with objects.

So, some thoughts I have on Lynda Benglis—Danny could you hold this for me?—some thoughts on Lynda Benglis: these fountains from 2014 to 2015. She herself is quoted as saying "I'm not the performer, the water is the performer." We've got the following thoughts:

Chelsea hands off her microphone and begins reading from sheets of paper, throwing each sheet away after finishing reading the line printed on it.

“A quartet of gorgeous fountains.”

“A joyful repast to the dour minimalism of Carl Andre’s gridded floor sculptures.”

“Rising to over 9 feet, with water falling down over it’s luxuriously crusty skin, it seems as if it’s leaping like a breaching whale.”

“Extravagantly gnarly forms”

“Scary infernal associations.”

“Resembling hulking, prehistoric swamp monsters emerging from a primordial bog with water spilling over their hideous hides”—I think that one’s referencing those over there.

“An upsurge of perhaps dangerously irrational psychic energies from some dark underworld”—Danny would you hold the mic? I’m sorry I can’t do this fast enough.

“An organic attraction to the sun and its life-giving light and warmth. They play feminine nature to Brancusi’s masculine abstraction in the conventional senses of those gendered terms.”

“Makes the feminine more explicit in the exhibition’s most recent and most beautiful fountain, *Pink Ladies*.”

“Startling, hot color.”

“Intense, almost erotic sensuality.”

“Creating an oasis of tropical hedonism, and a striking contrast to the industrial-style sculptures by Alexander Liberman, Mark Di Suvero, Richard Serra, and numerous others.”

I’m wondering what you guys think about all of this. Shit. Anybody, anybody? Right here?

“Well, I never read that – I’ve heard that, but I’ve never really thought about how arbitrary it can be, kind of this idea of this completely like, what could have possessed this person to make this, versus something with straight lines, which is kind of an interesting...cause in another way, Lynda was looking at classical art, another set of these are named *The Three Graces*, I mean it’s all within the same larger tradition and so it’s sort of interesting, a lot of the words that you brought up in terms of the context for a piece of...”

Chelsea: By the way, those texts were from Ken Johnson’s review in *The New York Times* this year, I just thought you might like to hear them. I’d love to hear a little bit more?

Audience member: [laughs] Sure! When we were talking to Lynda about these works she also was thinking about them so much as being related to her history as being from Lake Charles, Louisiana, and this idea of water as being something that [is not just] sort of pouring over them but also completely involved in their creation. She talked about the surfaces of these as being, um, as resembling those little holes that crabs make on the side of the beach, those little sort of crusty mounds, and I thought that was really interesting. And then with that other one she was thinking about lobsters, she was thinking about lava, water with all different sort of reasons behind it coming together to make these.

Chelsea: Thanks Nora! This is Nora, she’s the curator here – she’s *a* curator here – at Storm King, and thanks for your comments. I was thinking about my dreams that I was having about objects and I was wondering if any of you have been having object-oriented dreams. Oh, right there, can you come up here? So tell us about your dream.

Audience Member: Um, I had a dream that I had a dream that I was arrested by the queen and I was gonna be tortured by her and I was dragged off by the queen’s minions to the countryside and through the green hills of England, past all these big mansions and houses and there were objects spread out on the lawns and along the highways—

Chelsea: What kind of objects?

Audience member: Mostly things from my childhood and my past, like a beautiful boat that I had built and red boxes and grills and things that were kind of resonant in some way to memories from the past, and they kind of like brought up all these emotions. So I was passing all of these things and they’re beautifully laid out and I was in my body and I sat on Blank’s lap and asked what the torture would be like, if it would be really painful, and if – how long it would last. And Blank said that I would be taken to the edge of pain and suffering and then pushed further, and I remember thinking that

if I faked it and tricked them and broke down early in the torture they would be tricked into thinking that I'd reached that level so that if I was taken further, it wouldn't be too bad. I would be able to bear it.

Chelsea: Wow, intense! Thanks! Um, any other feedback about this work or dreams that you've had that relate to objects. Not everyone all at once! Oh, over here. You have a dream? Ok.

Audience member: I had a dream, and I think I was in a field, and there was a tree standing nearby and I had the impulse to go up and touch it and then I started pushing on it and ended up tearing off a branch, and I remember holding the branch, and then getting really worried that the branch was cursed and I ended up throwing it back onto the tree, and after a while I stood back and was looking at it and the tree had all these lines going all over it, and not like painted lines or anything but like when, like the tree had enveloped something, and then somebody came up and started talking to me and was explaining that these lines in the tree were actually all these Christmas lights that had been wrapped around the tree and that the tree had grown over the Christmas lights, and left all these lines. And then me and this person started like... there was this cord coming out of the bottom of the tree and we followed it and it went back to a house and I asked the person, I was curious if like the Christmas tree lights were bad for the tree, I was kind of concerned, but the person said they weren't.

Chelsea: Wow. Christmas lights embedded in a tree? That's really dark. Yes?

Audience member: Not an object-oriented dream, but listening to hear you read the review by Ken Johnson makes me think of something that I came across recently reading about Helen Frankenthaler's work, which was received in the late 50's—when she started painting directly on raw canvas so the canvas was absorbing the paint in a way that people weren't doing at the time—and it was described as “staining.” And in the reviews of her work when she started to show that work, men associated it with menstruation, and I can't help but think about that association and that male perspective when I hear what Ken Johnson said about this piece, especially because it's flowing, it's of a red color, and I don't know that there are many male artists whose work would be described as “erotic” and “sensual,” and so linked to female biology I suppose.

Chelsea: That's great, thank you. Ok I think we'll move on, I'd like to just head over here to the columns to look at the Mark Di Suvero work, I'll meet you over there.

[At the Columns] You guys should probably get up close so you can see, have the best vantage point. Ok.

Nora, would you mind talking a little bit about this work? You know much better than I how to talk about it.

Nora: So we have, I believe, ten Mark Di Suvero works, nine currently out on view in our field. We casually refer to these fields here as the Mark Di Suvero fields, he's been showing outside here since 1976, right after he had an all-city exhibition in New York where he showed large-scale works like these in all five boroughs of New York, and then after that, one of our two founders, Peter Stern, found him and said “do you have a plan for those afterwards, because I've actually got some space and this could be a great marriage.” I always think it's interesting to think about Mark as somebody who's so interested in poetry and thinks of his work really as poetry in motion, that he's working at the same time with the building blocks really, these I-beams and these H-beams that are used in exactly the type of construction that he wasn't very interested in, I mean capitalist buildings or international-style construction, and so I always think of them as sort of this poetic use of these materials that he otherwise hasn't supported.

Chelsea: Thank you. “What are years? What is our innocence? What is our guilt? All are naked, none is safe, and whence is courage the unanswered question, the resolute doubt, dumbly calling, deafly listening, that in misfortune even death encourage others and in its defeat stir the soul to be strong. He sees deep and is glad, who exceeds to mortality and in his imprisonment he rises upon himself as the sea in a chasm, unable to be free, but struggling to be, in his surrendering, finds its continuing. So he who strongly feels, behaves, the very bird grown taller as he sings, steals his form straight up, though he is captive, his mighty singing says, satisfaction is a lowly thing, how pure a thing is joy. This is mortality, this is eternity”

That's a Marianne Moore poem, after which Mark Di Suvero named one of his sculptures that was here, and I'm really interested in his relationship to poetry so I wanted to share that with you. Does anyone have any thoughts? I know it's really hot in the sun guys, I'm sorry, but if anyone has some thoughts on Mark Di Suvero, I'd love to hear them. Anybody at all?

Ok, well, we'll go look at Luke Stettner, another temporary exhibition just here to your left, I'll meet you over there.

This is a temporary exhibition by Luke Stettner, I'm gonna let Nora talk about it for a minute, but I wanted to just quote Mark Di Suvero for one more minute, he said the following in his monograph—can you get the monograph here at the book store? Soon—There's a great monograph that I read as part of research for this piece, he says:

“So much work is ephemeral now, and more and more of it is being churned out. I see these young artists and what they do is performance. Ok, that's great. You express yourself, the audience gets it, it might be anguish, it might be dismay, it might be all kinds of different joyousness or whatever. When you walk out of the gallery that space, the weird place that it went into, is gone. This is one of the things about sculpture—mostly antique sculpture—it's visited less, and yet, that sense of form is there, it's what we live with. We live with it, whether we're looking at a watch or reading a book or driving a car, the form is the way through.”

So, that's Mark Di Suvero, so now maybe you can tell us a little about this show, because it's coming down in the winter?

Nora: Yeah, the end of November. We worked with Luke Stettner to put this piece together, he's the third artist in our yearly outlook series, and what we're asking people to do is create works that in some way respond to our landscape, and it's kind of funny because it's sculptural, but it's not quite sculpture, it's kind of a piece that really engages with the landscape. If the landscape weren't there, we can't take it and put it someplace else, so it's sort of in between.

Luke titled this work *A B Moon D*, and it's just sort of interesting to think about in light of talking about Nevelson and talking about Benglis. He did this after many conversations that I had with him, and we of course got to know each other really well during the making of this piece and thinking about this piece. We would drive up all the time—I live in New York City, and so he would come to the city and drive up with me and we'd just talk about everything and so it's kind of interesting. He named it *A B Moon D* because that was something that my two-year-old son had said when he was trying to learn the alphabet. He was confused between C and the crescent moon, so he just called it “A B moon D”, but it's also this funny thing because I'm the curator, and I go out and I give talks about the work all the time, and I often don't say that because it's kind of this funny thing of personal life, public life, and being a woman, and being a curator, and sort of bringing that into the whole thing can be odd, but it also has so much to do with what he was trying to do with this piece. He's trying to talk about different types of language. As you see it from this view, and then you can also tell when you're down walking in it, it kind of looks like some sort of coded language, and it's not based on anything in particular but it's based on a lot of other types of precedents. So the idea of *A B Moon D* being something of all of our knowledge coming together to this one point, and not necessarily, and we can't necessarily parse out “this means this, this means this,” and subtract the systems from each other to get sort of a precise answer, so that's what he was looking at.

Chelsea: Thanks, Nora. What do you guys think? You guys are a really tough crowd, by the way. People in the back—we're gonna move in a minute—but come forward and, its these three tall trees in the middle of the field and then its charcoaled wood buried into petroglyphs. So, when is this coming down? It comes down at the end of November, so you should check it out for a second before we move on. I think it's meant to be...the trees almost function as sundials, is what he says?

Audience member: I just wanted to say that it was funny because I was looking at the Mark di Suvero piece the whole time that you were speaking and thinking that you were talking about it, and when Nora said the work needs the landscape to exist, I couldn't have disagreed more, and so I had to re-locate myself to find the piece that she was talking about. But it kind of interested me the way in which, in many ways I feel like the Mark Di Suvero work doesn't need this landscape it almost feels like it could be located anywhere, and the landscape in a way gets denuded, or meaningless, by the way in

which the sculpture locates itself in this sort of empty way within the landscape. Whereas I think the Luke Stettner piece really does something quite interesting where the sort of barrenness of those trees makes me really look at the clearing around the space and think about growth versus sculpture. It also makes me think about symbol versus something natural or non-symbolic, and the way in which those shadow-like forms appear to be symbolic, I guess sort of somewhere between “A” and “Moon.”

Chelsea: Thank you. Anyone else? Nick?

Nick: I just wanted to point out, because I think this is something that maybe has a bearing on how everyone is reading the sculpture, that Luke once dated my sister.

Chelsea: Well, they both sound really lucky. Ok we’re gonna just finish off the tour down at the Ursula von Rydingsvard, it’s the tall wooden sculpture there, come on down.

My home was one in which words were not used very often, in fact anybody that used too many words was automatically suspect. I drink from the world through visual means. I learned to smile, but you ration that, you laugh, but not very frequently, and really at appropriate times, and that working hard was the answer to life. I almost think of it as the way the Shakers might live. We stayed in wooden barracks, raw wooden floors, raw wooden walls, and raw wooden ceilings. I build everything out of cedar, very neutral, almost like a piece of paper. I do have books that I’ve written in, I use this as a way to talk to myself, and I write down my dreams. Documenting them is one of the things that makes me feel lighter.

So this is my object-oriented dream: I had to give Blank a ride to the airport. I’d been driving all day, and I’d been drinking all day, so it wasn’t a good combination, but I had to do it. And Blank had his feet in the place that I needed to press the gas, and also there were two steering wheels, one was regular and one was like right in my lap, so the whole thing was really confusing and really strange, and I had no perspective, and then I ran over a woman in the street, and Blank said

“Keep going! Keep going! Keep going!”

And the guilt stacked up in my stomach, but I kept going. I kept going.

I mean that’s—what does that say about me? What does that say about objects?

So this is the Ursula von Rydingsvard. There’s one down here too. As she is quoted as saying, she works with cedar, and she uses I think graphite to rub into the sculptures. The one down there is a little bit more graphite-y. I encourage you to check them both out, they’re my favorite sculptures at the park.

And to end I’d love to perform a dialogue between Mark Di Suvero and Ursula von Rydingsvard with you. Anybody wanna read with me? Come on down. We can use this script. Yeah, let’s use this one.

Ok so I’m gonna play the part of Mark di Suvero, and you, what’s your name?

Colin: Colin.

Chelsea: Colin’s gonna play the part of Ursula.

Colin [quoting Ursula]: I’m a sculptor. What it means, it’s kind of a disease.

Chelsea/Mark: Oh, no!

Colin/Ursula: Yes!

Chelsea/Mark: oh, no no no! It’s health!

Colin/Ursula: It is health, it is on the side of health. It is there whether you want it or not, it's a way of life. It's not something you do, it's a way of living, it's a way of thinking.

Chelsea/Mark: An understanding of form is a form of health. But people respond to it Ursula, people love your work, you know that. Yet I can hear that when you're telling me about it, I can feel like a – I've never been in a concentration camp, but I can imagine.

Colin/Ursula: [scoffs] It wasn't a concentration camp, it was a refugee camp for displaced Polish people.

Chelsea/Mark: It's still a place where, although the future is not imminent death, you don't know where you're going to go. You can't look for it, or toward anything. Whatever might happen is what you've got.

Colin/Ursula: That's right.

Chelsea/Mark: You can feel it, but you're still living with that anguish, how about a little joy?

Colin/Ursula: [Scoffs louder] come on! I think there's that eking out.

Chelsea/Mark: That's coming out?

Colin/Ursula: I think so.

Chelsea/Mark: I look at some of those, like I think that you're going deeper and deeper into your subconscious, it's becoming your anything – anything, maybe even darker.

Colin/Ursula: It-it's getting darker?

Chelsea/Mark: Darker, right, worse.

Colin/Ursula: No shit, are you serious?

Chelsea/Mark: It just feels like that, but not too much.

Colin/Ursula: I don't have the intention of getting darker.

Chelsea: Ok. Thanks. Thanks everyone! If anyone has any last thoughts about this work, it's her only piece that has a bronze part, and you should come tap on it. Are we allowed to touch these things? Oh, DON'T tap on it.