

A Nomadic Art Museum

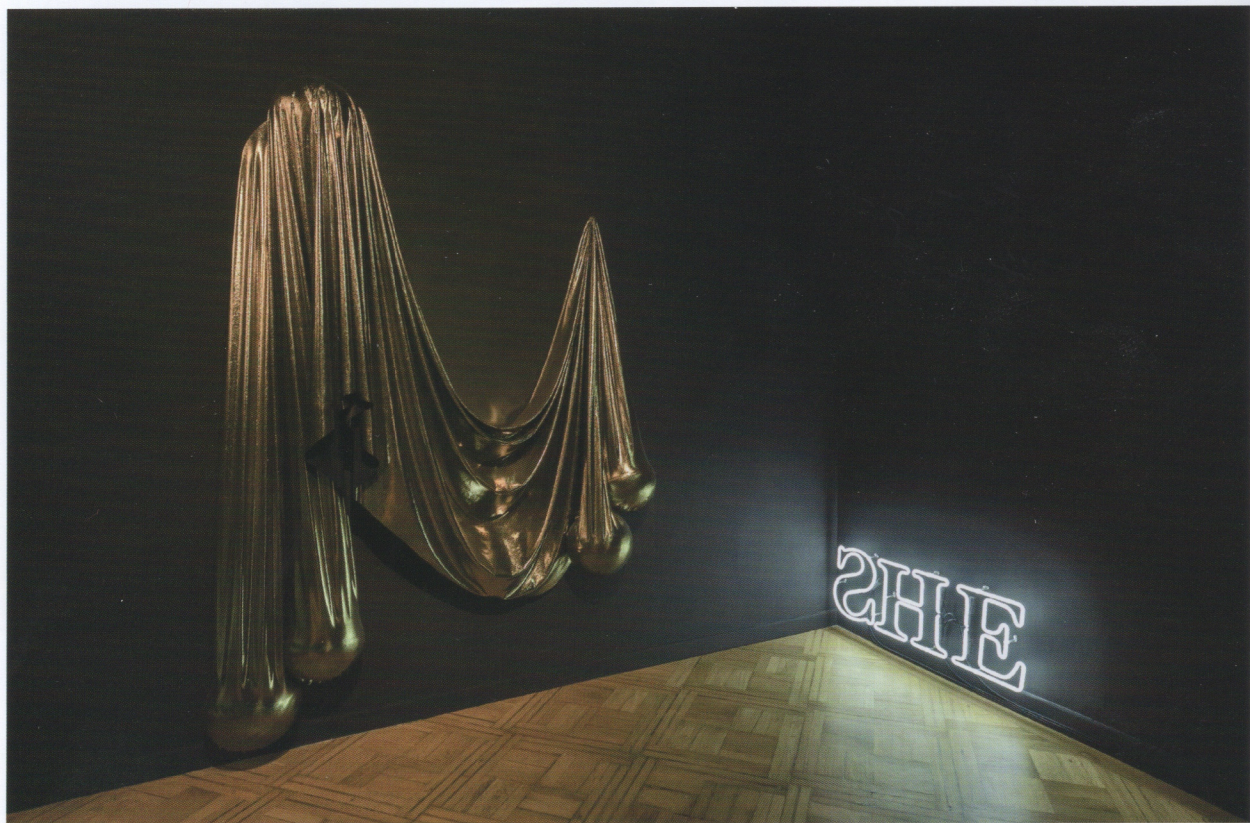


Black Cube

2015–2020

Laura Shill
Joel Swanson
Personal Structures

PALAZZO BEMBO
VENICE, ITALY
05.11.2017 – 11.26.2017





Joel Swanson, *S/HE*. Photos by Wes Magyar

On the occasion of the 57th Venice Biennale, Black Cube presented a two-person exhibition featuring works by Colorado-based artists Laura Shill and Joel Swanson at the historic Palazzo Bembo in Italy. Coordinated by the European Cultural Centre, *Personal Structures: Time, Space, Existence* was a multisite exhibition in the context of the Venice Biennale that explored themes of societal systems that confine, define, and organize us. In response to this overarching concept, Shill and Swanson's sculptural works considered the intermediary spaces of binary structures found both in gender and the English language.

Simultaneously grotesque and alluring, Laura Shill's *Trophy Wall (to disguise the void)* was a wall relief composed of secondhand basketballs and soccer balls veiled in gold Spandex fabric. By melding materials, forms, and aesthetics associated with masculinity and femininity, the installation examined social norms and gendered archetypes. The title *Trophy Wall* referenced the act of showcasing trophies, for example, a hunter's display of taxidermy animals or an athlete's arrangement of medals. Disguised, the sporting balls took the form of male genitals when concealed behind a curtain of slinky Spandex. Commonly used to make performance costuming, Spandex interested the artist as a medium due to its popularity in female-dominated fields like dance, beauty pageants, and the sex industry. The parenthetical section of the title, *to disguise the void*, alluded to the covering of a cavernous, open, empty space. The concept of the void has been linked to female genitals in academic circles from Plato to Freud and has been more recently debated by feminist thinkers. As a whole, Shill's installation asked viewers to reflect on the objectification of desire, the male and female gaze, and the influence of disguise.

Joel Swanson's semiotically playful neon sculptures investigated the concept of binaries through a presentation of the words "she" and "there." In his work *S/HE*, the "s" flickered between the HE and SHE settings, concurrently acknowledging both gender definitions and gender fluidity. The "s" in the work appeared backwards to create further ambiguity between the space of HE and SHE. Similarly, Swanson's neon sculpture *T/HERE* implied that opposing ideas are one and the same. "Here" is innately a part of "there;" to have distance one must first have place. Both works took root in divergent concepts that were connected through language.

Swanson was intrigued by the medium of neon and its history, specifically its use in outdoor signage. Neon has a close connection to American culture; the United States was the first country to widely adopt neon as a symbol of the Hollywood lifestyle, the epitome of glamour; conversely, it has also become associated with more middle-class pursuits such as advertising, and the sad nostalgia of urban decay.

The dichotomy in Shill and Swanson's works represented an age-old pattern of how we perceive the world in black and white terms. Many cultures speak about the contrast between day and night, male and female, body and mind, and good and evil. The works in *Personal Structures* revealed what lies beyond the polarity of opposites by surveying the intermediate spaces within gender norms and language. Both works were also timely representations of the fear of "the other" that resurfaced within American politics during the first year of Donald Trump's presidency in 2016. As such, the artists questioned whether we, as a society, were at a tipping point where we might break open the definitions of gender and reconsider how we view differences.

"Language primarily exists within two-dimensional media and creating language in three-dimensional sculptural forms can expose the subtle, but significant, relationship between language and dimensionality.

My goal in this process is to make work that



challenges people to
rethink how they use
language and how
language uses them.
If you think about the
conflicts in our world,
most start from binaries
that are structured within
language."

- Joel Swanson

JOEL SWANSON

Y/OURS

Hovering parallel to the ground and elevated above the alleyway on 16th Street between Champa and Curtis, Joel Swanson's neon text installation *Y/OURS* questioned how public space is defined through notions of personal property and ownership. Fabricated in large neon letters, the "Y" in "YOURS" blinked on and off, alternating between the embedded words "YOURS" and "OURS." The oscillating pronouns shifted these terms of possession in regards to the alley, suggesting a perceived division of proprietorship between the city and its residents. Although it may be argued that cities own alleyways (since they operate under integral city-managed infrastructure), alleyways are actually public-use spaces—they are owned collectively by the city's residents through the payment of taxes, similar to roads, sidewalks, or city parks.³⁴ In this context, Swanson's installation advocated for the importance of cultivating civic ownership and responsibility, thereby reframing viewers' awareness in understanding the city in which they live more holistically.

34. The Downtown Denver Partnership and Denver Parks and Recreation, *The Outdoor Downtown: The Future of Denver's Parks and Public Spaces*, accessed June 19, 2020, https://www.denvergov.org/content/dam/denvergov/Portals/747/documents/planning/the-outdoor-downtown/The-Outdoor-Downtown_Master-Plan-FINAL.pdf.

