



Ivana Bašić, *I will lull and rock my ailing light in my marble arms #1* (2017) (detail).
Wax, glass, breath, weight, pressure,
stainless steel, oil, 126 × 128 × 14 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and
Marlborough Contemporary.

Interior States of the Art

“I am writing this in a Schrödinger cat box in high orbit around the quarantined world of Armaghast.... It will be my entire world until the end of my life.”¹
Dan Simmons

In the mid-1990s, the Argentine-born artist Eduardo Costa began a series of what he called “volumetric paintings”: foods, figures, and shapes made entirely of acrylic paint. The illusion, he claimed, was thorough; he had dispatched the substrate for good. Hardboiled eggs had yolks, watermelons were filled with red flesh and black seeds, portrait busts sometimes had brains. But folks doubted his word. This was something they could not—could *never*—lay eyes on, and so, as with the biblical Thomas, they tried to call Costa’s bluff. He met the challenge with a series of public demonstrations. At a table on a stage, he and his assistants cut paintings open to reveal the stringy orange cavity of a squash, the blue ribs of a blue triangle.²

An artwork’s story can’t usually be verified with a knife. We have to trust the label, and trust the surface. Demanding proof of a work’s stated nature goes against the fundamental promise the viewer makes to the artist: “I won’t ask you to prove it, so long as it’s true.” The artist promises in return: “I will tell you it’s true, so long as you don’t ask me to prove it.”

Is it “avant-garde” and/or “de rigueur” to probe exactly this tenuous contract? Take *Stories of Almost Everyone* (Hammer Museum, 2018, curated by Aram Moshayedi with

curatorial assistant Ikechukwu Onyewuenyi), an ensemble group show that would disintegrate without the “stories” surrounding each piece. For instance, on the floor are two locked suitcases from the series *Lost and Found* by Lara Favaretto. Inside each one is the lost luggage of an anonymous airline traveler, as well as some of the artist’s own personal effects. There are no keys. Or so the story goes: each is a time capsule with no final date. And it’s this unknown and unseen, unknowable and unseeable contents with no scheduled reveal that gives the work its tension—not the suitcases’ shells.

Stories of Almost Everyone pends in the space between art objects and their supporting texts. There is hardly a work on view that doesn’t ask to be explained. (Rolls of caution tape along the gallery baseboards—a Lutz Bacher piece called *DANGER* (2017)—are a smart counterpoint, insofar as this intervention leaves nothing to unpack...) The show seems to luxuriate in the certainty that we will never know the truth. A glossy yellow McCracken plank leaning against the wall, as they do, is not a McCracken; read the label and you learn it’s *Sculpture #3* by Darren Bader (no date given). “McCracken famously filled his sculptures,” reads the exhibition catalog, “with a variety of supernatural pretenses.”³ Bader’s ersatz plank, though, is more like Favaretto’s suitcases. It literally has unseeable contents: according to the curator, it is filled with trash. The label and the catalog don’t tell you that.

But what if there isn’t anything inside after all? Sometimes there probably isn’t. A vintage globe on a wooden stand, *Lot 34. Replogle Thirty-two-inch Library Globe* (2013) by Danh Vo, matters mostly because it once belonged to Robert McNamara. Telephone poles sent to the museum by Christodoulos Panayiotou (*Independence Street*, 2012) are (probably) wooden through and through, but the kicker is that they used to line Independence Street in Limassol, Cyprus, and

symbolize that country's march of time. A diamond made by Jill Magid from the ashes of Luis Barragán, Mexico's most famous architect, proves its alleged provenance with nothing beyond several notarized documents, letters, and an artist's text in a nearby vitrine (*The Proposal*, 2016). Diamond or not, the work exists primarily as paratext—more so than the work with physical secrets, since such work could be physically deconstructed and disproved. Such paratext-dependent pieces must be taken on their own self-evidence. Their interiority has no substance.

In what has become a canonical argument, the art historian Arthur Danto defines art as “embodied meaning.” (“The whimpers of god and of a baby are indiscernible,” he writes, “though the difference between them is momentous.”)⁴ He dwells on the example of Warhol's Brillo boxes and other cartons: Warhol's pieces *look* like the real thing, but they *aren't*—and therein lies the art. One thing has always bothered me about this argument: Warhol's “embodiments” don't stand up upon closer inspection; they are obviously ink on wood, not on cardboard. Danto admits that some of Warhol's boxes bear visible drips of paint—but then waves this problem away. Like Costa's acrylic produce, they are paintings in the round. “Andy's boxes had no such contents [actual Brillo pads],” Danto writes, “but he could have filled his boxes with the pads and they would still be art.”⁵ But the transformation Danto describes—the embodiment of meaning as an object—is closer to what happens with the diamond or the poles: a minor alchemy that hinges on belief.

Did someone say alchemy? For *Torture of Metals* (2017), a work by Miljohn Ruperto included in *Stories*, the artist took a gold nugget and 3D-printed it in each of the alchemist's sextet of elemental metals (lead, iron, copper, tin, silver, mercury). It is as if Ruperto has distilled gold back into its secret ingredients, using the latest technology to both take up and reverse

the alchemist's impossible task. It is not such a leap; art and alchemy have intertwined in the popular imagination since the middle ages. A 2017 exhibition at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, *Alchemie: Die Große Kunst* (Alchemy: The Great Art), connected the chemistry of pigments and films to the inner science they are used to depict. Alongside inscrutable medieval diagrams of demigods in glass vials were Sarah Schönfeld's microscopic photographs of various drugs, from caffeine to meth to LSD. Then as now, the pursuit itself of an “inner truth” or underlying law is its own self-evident ritual. What art hasn't shaken, and won't shake, is the idea that an illusion can have the same effects as the real thing; that meaning, if not matter, can be effectively created and destroyed. (If it looks like gold, tastes like gold, transacts like gold—)

And so, something chemical—if not quite alchemical—persists even in the Information Age. Elaine Cameron-Weir's sculptures, like Victorian medical apparatus, suffuse galleries with heated amber scents. Hayden Dunham's work combines resins, screens, containers, glass, and clay in arrangements that look like they do something, but don't. Lately, Nicholas Bourriaud, who coined “relational aesthetics,” thinks a new cohort of artists has turned to “molecular art,” expressing a certain ecological concern through their attention to natural or nature-like materiality.⁶ Even here, the artwork lives or dies by paratext—or else the viewer may miss the fact that a Dunham piece contains not “charcoal” but “activated charcoal,” or that the rubber Ivana Bašić uses to make her fleshly alien blobs is the same kind used in human prosthetics.

We could rephrase the “molecular turn” as an “invisible” or “interior” one. An artwork may or may not be what it says it is, but the art disappears unless we act like it's telling the truth. At Human Resources in 2017, Candice Lin and Patrick Staff assembled an ultraviolet installation of smoke

1. Dan Simmons, *Endymion*. London: Headline, 1996.

2. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfOnYhqDgeQ>.

3. Aram Moshayedi, *Stories of Almost Everyone* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2018), 32.

4. Arthur Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2013), 81.

5. *Ibid.*, 37.



Candice Lin and Patrick Staff,
promotional image for *LESBIAN GULLS*,
DEAD ZONES, *SWEAT AND T.* (2017).
Image courtesy of the artists and
Human Resources Los Angeles.
Photo: Ian Byers-Gamber.

machines, wooden wall frames, and texts (alchemical and plain chemical) carved into cross-lit plexiglass. The texts described age-old herbal hormone treatments known as anti-androgens, which inhibit testosterone. Meanwhile the texts gradually revealed that the smoke you were surrounded by and breathing was, the artists said, laced with this same plant-derived hormone. The transmission of knowledge became, or already was, a transmission of a biochemical kind—the paranoid corollary to the invisible cause/condition. The “secret magic” of art was no longer suspended between its probabilities, but bracingly present, infectious, and physical. Still, we have to take the artists at their word...

Artworks’ interior states host transformations that we can catalyze in our minds but not actually see, almost in the same way we supply our bodies with chemicals—food and drugs—and hope for the best. Charles Ray’s *Yes* (1990) is a self-portrait of the artist on LSD. *No*, from two years later, is a portrait of a realistic dummy of the artist, wearing the artist’s clothes. These two works mark a limit case for photography/art/representation’s ability to convey an inner world. In the latter, there is none; in the former, an unknowable surplus. *No*, like a Warhol Brillo box, is clearly wooden; *Yes* exists in the story of how it was made. What is art? Art is what sustains the contradiction.

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Elaine Cameron-Weir, *Who are what looks out from behind you are is the thing that names what transforms...now, look what calms the captive by letting him sniff the perfume, like smell what smells like your masters crotch* (2017).
Leather, laboratory heating mantle, cast glass, labdanum resin, high altitude flight mask, transformer, stainless steel, 18 x 18 x 74 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.