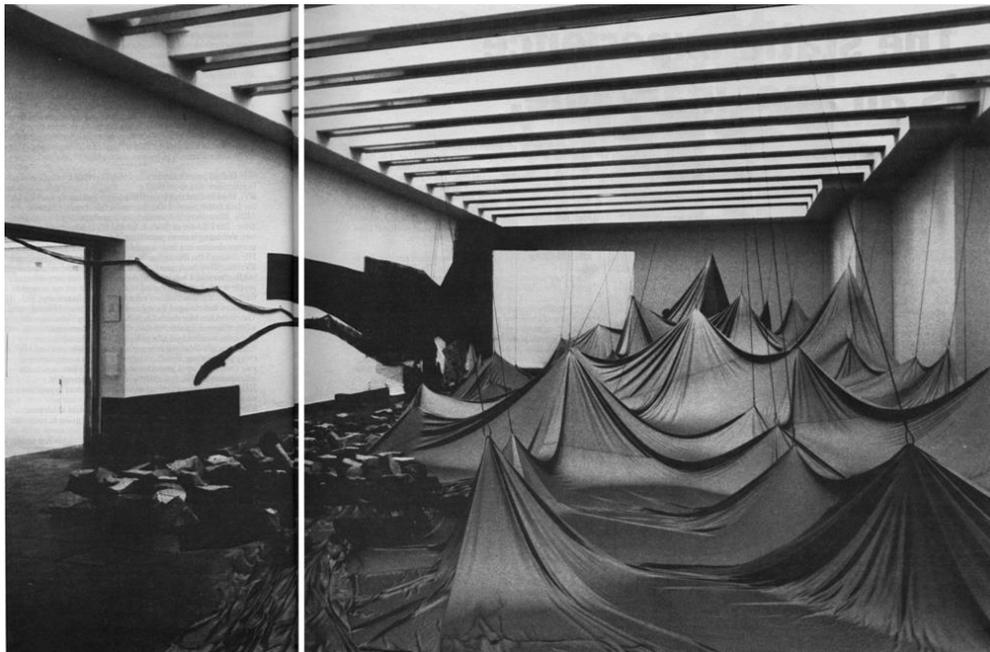


Jessica Stockholder

by Stephen Westfall

Jessica Stockholder has revitalized abstraction and formalism by obliterating most of their self-imposed dialectical boundaries. Her installations and wall works have an eerie familiarity about them. You can sense the presence of Constructivism and Action Painting, as well as Schwitters, Rauschenberg, Caro, and Tuttle in her sensibility, but the material, vernacular, and gestural force are distinctly her own. She is one of the most significant sculptors to emerge in the last decade.



Jessica Stockholder, *Growing Rock Candy Mountain Grasses in Canned Sands*, April 1992, place: Westfälischer Kunstverein, Munster, Germany, mixed media, Dimensions: The piece exists in a room approximately 29 × 9 meters.

Stephen Westfall It's funny that you express nervousness over the interview process because those stages that I've described, the transcription of the interview, and the restructuring of questions to establish a certain compacted continuity, find a corollary in your work process. You talk about the power of your own work coming from overlapping systems. The interview process is a literary version of that. It is part performance, on an intimate scale, for a projected audience. When you pull your work together in an installation the art audience has also yet to arrive.

Jessica Stockholder Yeah, and the process of making it isn't observed. I mean, right away when you turned the tape recorder on there is another part of me watching that wasn't there before. Making an installation doesn't shift that much from being in my studio.

SW Even though you are manipulating, engaging, and evoking feelings about yourself in the process of your work—an ongoing construction of identity. Do you think, there is something very strange about the creative ego in art? There is a persona that I've become aware of in my own pile-up of work over the years.

JS I've recently become aware of the pile-up of work as intrusive. When I made a decision about something I was going to do, it used to be very charged. Whatever I chose would become incredibly important because I chose this one way out of five. But now, with a history of having made similar choices, and knowing that I

am going to do it again so many times, the weight on each decision is very different and that's a little unnerving.

SW Is it unnerving because there is an attachment to the idea of art being spoken from a sense of urgency or desperation?

JS Perhaps, and there is also a comfort in thinking that the one choice you made was the right choice. Now I have this whole array of choices clearly possible from past experience and an imaginary future. It is clear that any one of those, or many of those choices could take one down an equally interesting path and be equally valid. I can't believe anymore that there is one right way to do things. I'm not sure that I ever did, but I think that I would have liked to.

SW Your work has an almost shocking sense of freedom of erasure and change, and uses that erasure or change as the connective tissue to a gestural extension.

JS There is a covering up, a hiding of things and also an incredibly up-front quality. I don't often erase things, like make a mark and erase it the way you would on a drawing. I see it more as a covering up. It happens through a positive action rather than a negative one.

SW Oh, so it's obscuring by accretion rather than by attrition.

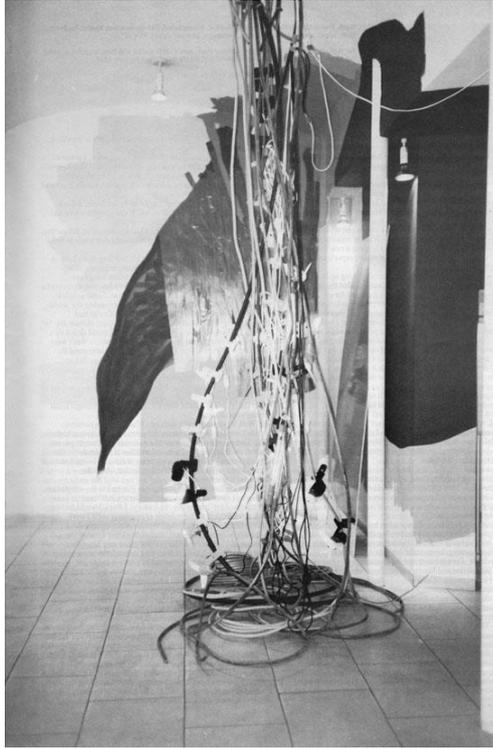
JS Yes, exactly! I'm deciding not to show it.

SW What you did before is included in the passage of surface. Nothing is lost and yet, somehow something is inherently revoked by change.

JS Well, I would agree with you but I think that it is irrevocable for my process, not for the finished product. Having noticed that I did something, that is irrevocable for me and my experience. It's not irrevocable in terms of what gets presented to the world. It is important to notice what it is you decided to do in the world.

SW And your next action becomes a response to the consciousness of how you've just acted. In both our everyday lives and the presumably heightened consciousness of studio activity we have habitual actions. But to notice, in the way you are talking about, shakes us out of the conscious sleep of our habits. Does this happen in spite of the program established by your preparatory drawings?

JS It does. They don't tell me exactly where in the space something will begin and end, or exactly how material will be there, or in many cases how it will be made, how something will be held together—all of which in the end is a large part of what the work is about. So the drawings for the installations are an outline that lets me decide to order some materials, and usually determines my thinking about how I am going to address the space. Sometimes I abandon them once I start to work, or at least I change a lot. They can get in my way a little bit. I try to leave things open enough so I don't have the feeling that I know what I am doing when I get there.



Jessica Stockholder, *SpICE BOXed Project(ion)*, 1992, mixed media, Galerie Metropole, Vienna, room approximately 22 × 14 × 12 feet. All photos courtesy American Fine Arts, Colin de Land.

SW Color becomes such an emotionally or psychologically directive element in your work and I notice that you often make basic color decisions in your drawings. Have you ever found yourself deciding that a certain color scheme is just not going to work in the middle of the action of the work?

JS Yeah, sometimes I just change the color, but sometimes I start to use the color differently. Like the piece that I have just made in Vienna. Before I got there, I was thinking about the color green creating a kind of atmosphere or charging the air in front of it, and green doesn't do that. Yellow and red do that.

SW At least certain types of green.

JS Yeah, so the way in which the piece became cohesive was entirely different than how I thought about it in the drawings. The emphasis in the work changed to one of surface, because of the particular qualities of that gallery.

SW Did you keep the green?

JS Yes, I kept the green.

SW And relinquished the idea of charging the atmosphere?

JS Yeah.

SW And what did you gain when you let go of that original hope or intention?

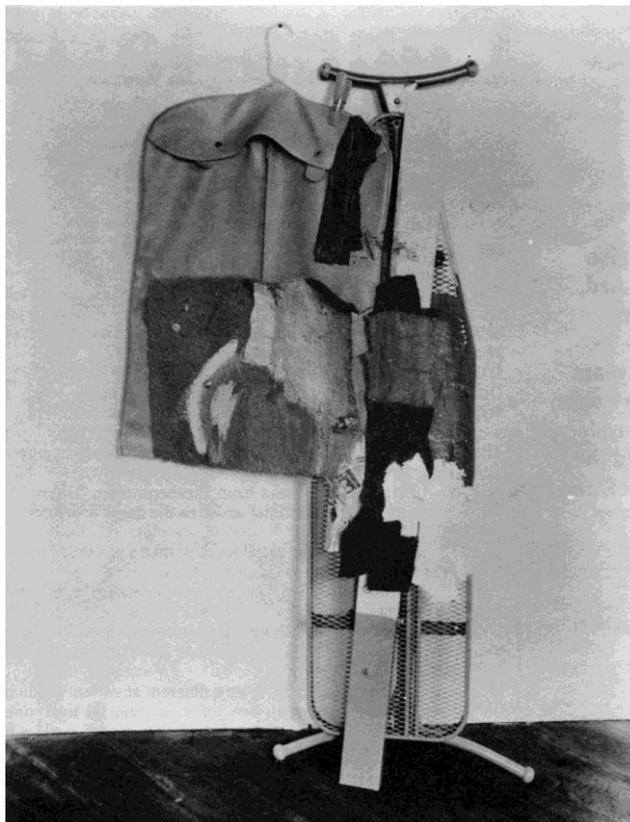
JS It has something to do with time restraints, energy, and physical capability. To do the whole piece again might not have been possible. I tend to take advantage of what happens. I don't spend time getting upset if a piece of wood breaks, I figure out how to make use of the break. I would rather take what is available to me and run with it. I would rather do that than bang my head against the wall because I don't have what I need.

SW Are you aware that it is something you are capable of doing to yourself, a momentary depression in the face of contingencies?

JS Yes, I don't think I do it so much in terms of my work. Part of why I am an artist is that it's an arena where I am allowed to do whatever I want.

SW As opposed to the rest of life.

JS Yeah, in the rest of my life I can spend a lot of time agonizing because I don't have exactly what I need. I have a script that says it should be thus and so, but for some reason I am able to abandon a script in making my art. And that's what I like about it so much. I like John Cage's and Alan Kaprow's thinking. I love that kind of philosophy, taking advantage of chance. I read their writings and everything in me warms up to that kind of thinking. I do that, but there is more of a struggle in my work around those issues than in theirs. My work isn't about just that. There is clearly some kind of imposed order, some dependence on art history and aesthetics that overlays whatever chance and happenstance I let occur.



Jessica Stockholder, *2 x 4 plus*, mixed media, 65 x 32 inches.

SW The whole notion of engaging chance in the creation of the work strikes me as truly outside of, or liberated from, a romantic sensibility, and yet there is so much about your work that I find romantic. I have actually made some notes here.

JS Yes, say more about that.

SW Here is the question. I read a tremendous emotionality in your work. The titles such as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and the pieces dedicated to your father and to the painter, Mary Heilmann, refer not only to the materials, but to the physical location of the work, *My Father's Yard*, or shared aesthetic agendas with another artist who works in a more conventional traditional medium, but also to friendship, family ties and the imaginal life of childhood. These and other tendencies in your work, such as the often breathtaking scale of your installations, their gestural velocity and the recurring elegiac deployment of

lumbering domestic furniture such as bureaus, refrigerators, mattresses which sometimes float along the floor like icebergs and which can also be set off like some heroic landscape feature—like a butte or mesa—all these tendencies strike me as a manifestation of romantic sensibility. I am really surprised, in the face of so much current discourse, to find it there so vividly. Are you disappointed by that reading or is that okay?

JS Well no, I am not disappointed with it and I don't disagree with it but I don't know if I would have said it that way. I don't work in response to writing very much, you know, what the current critical talk is. When you talk about feelings and psychology and childhood it can become clichéd very quickly. When it becomes clichéd you have lost what it is you wanted. But my impulse to make a work begins with my feeling that emotional life isn't allowed room in the world. This feeling is personal to me and my history, but I think it is also a modern issue in that a lot of people share those worries and feelings. So my work becomes a place to make fantasy and emotional life as concrete and real and important as a refrigerator, or the room that you are in.

SW There's a monumentalization of gesture and memory in your work. One of the powerful, emotional reaches of romantic art has been this notion of extension of an imaginal terrain on a scale before which carefully held self-identity begins to break down.

JS For you looking at it or for me creating it?

SW Art is a dialogue between the maker and the viewer. So I would say for both and the risk, of course, for the maker is that self-identity is so much a part of the work. The cliché about the insane artist pretty much begins with romanticism but it also applies to the viewer. That is partly what is meant by the sublime. The poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, first talked about an "inscape" as opposed to a "landscape." In romantic art a landscape, as vast as it may be, and as located as it may be—in Yosemite with Bierstadt's paintings, or in the Amazon with Cole—there is a sense that something more is there. There is also a projection of the artist's inner life and the infinite extension implied that dwarfs the scale of our own body sense. It is perceived as a high wire act, a risky act by the audience and, presumably, is experienced as that by the artist. That is part of the audience's perception, at least. The process of the work tends to grind down habit or intentionality and something is formulated in that action as a fuller response to the pre-conceived idea.

JS That's because it creates an experience, or creates the possibility for one. I put something in the world and then I have an experience in relationship to it that I can't control, or at least I can't totally control. So there is room for things to grow. In terms of the work being romantic, or emotional or from childhood—all the ways it is rooted in my life—all of that information is important to other people only in so far as it provides a place for them to experience those things in their own life. In many ways people's experiences are very similar, in terms of what we are capable of experiencing and the range of emotions that we have available to us. The way in which those emotions are structured or ordered is more important than that they are there. What is important in the end is whether that emotional experience is given a new frame of reference or whether the piece provides a way to experience those feelings differently.

SW There is a classically modernist idea of opening up the process of the work to the viewers' imagination. That the image and the process become one in a way that it doesn't for an extended and total piece of music or a panoramic landscape painting, which are feats of technical virtuosity, still very tied to notions of mastery that tend to exclude the audience. I look at your installations and I can hear the tape being pulled up when an edge is exposed on a plane of paint. I can hear the nails going in. I can feel the weight of things where they meet each other. In my bodily response to the work, I recreate the process of its coming together. It makes me feel that not only is it something I would want to do, but in fact I *could* do it. Part of the modernist agenda as I have always understood it has been that kind of democratization of the creative process. It says, "Yes you can do it!" Someone says, "Oh, my three year old kid can do that," or, "I can do that." The modernist would respond "Why don't you! Yes, you could, why don't you?" One of the great joys I find in your work is that sense of exciting the mind and the body to material, to all material. Rauschenberg used to say, "My paintings are an invitation to look someplace else." Your installations are an invitation to get into the flow.

JS That sounds nice. I do feel like there is a rarification of art cultivated in the art market that I am not interested in and that I fight against. I do want my work to seem like somebody could do it. That it is not a work of genius, some rare object that nobody else could do.

SW Or a product of frontline technology.

JS Yeah, it's not high tech. That is what has confused me about your statement. My focus isn't on keeping things available for people in terms of skill—I don't think that ends up being the truth. It is presenting the material world in a way that is understandable. I'm not interested in using a computer because you can't look at that and have a feeling about "stuff." I am interested in the quality of material, whether it is a chair or a piece of concrete: that you experience it over time, that it changes with the light, that you have a particular experience of it that is separate from talking about it, taking pictures of it, or writing about it. That's where the work grows for me, and the result of that is pretty low tech. There is also something that is very particular or specific that I struggle for in each piece that is in contrast to slap dash. But it's not about skill or technology either. It's about a structure of thinking. It's very formal. As the piece gets closer to being finished there are fewer decisions, fewer possibilities. Each decision becomes more important and has more weight in terms of how the whole thing fits together. I think it has to do with strings of references and a tension between the work being finished or not finished, complete or not complete. But in so far as I want things in the work not to have a fussed over quality, I want to provide a direct experience of things, I think that's true.

SW In the interaction of the elements in your work, I sense a celebration of ideas that we can only term aesthetic. This seems to be something that fell into disrepute, an idea or an admittance that has seemed more and more risky or nostalgic, especially to a lot of younger artists.

JS It is important to say what you mean by aesthetic. I don't think aesthetics is just about pleasure. It's to allow pleasure and any other kind of experience that goes with it.

SW Pleasure and play. Play is highly communicative, interactive, and a movement of the mind. It's also structural; it tends to build on itself.

JS All of those things have meaning. When they don't have as much meaning, they become decorative, sometimes a little clichéd, all of that is a part of our life. But when things are decorative or clichéd or less challenging they function to support a way of thinking. I think about taste in that way. Some peoples' notion of good taste reinforces a way of understanding the world that supports the world as they want it to be. Things that introduce a new way of thinking, challenge notions of taste are, for some people, wonderful. They like to have the world shook up a little, to have their thinking challenged. Other people don't want that, it offends them. That's the only way I can understand the difference between taste and beauty. For me, things that are beautiful are things that are awkward and shake things up, and stretch how I can understand things as complete. As I get to understand something a little better, it is less interesting and less beautiful.

SW There comes a point where if taste degrades enough it can be made use of again.

JS Well, it becomes more defined. When you can isolate a certain taste then it means something for a certain time in history.



Jessica Stockholder, *Untitled*, mixed media, 1989.

SW There is not a lot between the notion of abstractness as we understand it in the visual arts and a notion of the aesthetic that tends to degrade. The will to abstractness can also be read as a will to Purity or a will to the Aesthetic that tends to deny the psychological or the imaginistic.

JS I don't follow what you are saying. For me, to the extent that the work is abstract and not literal or literary, it is freed up to say something. I feel trapped by the literary. I think I would feel my work more subject to degradation or emptying out if I were making figurative work. Things that are abstract have the possibility to include different ways of thinking. I was at the Museum of Modern Art today looking at the way figures are presented. So often, people are trying to break the presentation of the figure. Lucas Samaras' portrait of a person holding a photograph of himself holding his own portrait in a jar breaks the believability of the body as a container—this body that we all have and we are all looking at that is being represented to us in painting or sculpture or photographs. Our modern dilemma seems to be a questioning of that containment. Questioning that the presentation of our bodies can in fact be us.

SW Or even the idea of the body as a boundary. The boundary to what? So much political discussion the last several years has been about the social boundaries of the body. But also, aesthetically, the body as a limit of action. There is nothing in your work which can't be done by a body, accomplished by a body. So much imagery has been about this question of where the body is. Our common sense tells us our bodies are right here and yet we are abstracted out of our notions of the limitations of the body. This happens in computer space and virtual reality. A non-sensate, purely visual space that can be 3D becomes a total mental construct, like a living memory with an attendant sense of vertigo.

JS And also, bodies aren't like objects. In a painting, there's the body and there is the table, and they are somehow equal. But bodies are constantly changing, the shape is changing, how it appears when the light and you turn. Especially with babies, it's so amazing, they are changing in front of your eyes because they are growing so fast. There is something about the body as an event rather than an object that is a little disconcerting. It implies our death.

SW Oh, definitely, and in midlife there's secondary acceleration of change. When I see a gray hair in the mirror, I am so moved that something is happening that I don't have this vain response to just pluck it out. It is mythic in a way. I feel differently, however, when the hair starts growing out of my ears. But the idea of the body as an ongoing event is a powerful one.

JS I think that in my work there is both a sense of time passing, that the work is temporal; and another feeling, that I'd say goes with art in this culture. Art is a little abstracted from the rest of our life and put in a separate building and made for those buildings, and thought of as separate from time. As a result, it is static, formal, beautiful, and has a quality of timelessness happening over and through this very temporal installation.

SW You refer to a certain calm, a serenity. There is all this furious action in your work and yet in the viewers' freedom to experience it at different times of day and walk through it, even if that occasion is itself temporal, there is a chance for it to unfold more slowly. Another action of the work becomes its unfolding to perception after it's done. Which must be very different from the energy that's expended in erecting it.

JS Building the pieces is sometimes not much fun. There isn't the same pleasure that comes from looking at them. Building them is usually a struggle. I'm irritable, grumpy, upset, and worried. It's difficult. Then looking at the piece afterward, there is still some of that, there are always difficult places in the work that make me uncomfortable. But, to the extent that the work is successful, I'm provided an experience that is not there while building it. It's an experience of being really wonderful or exciting. It keeps me moving just the right way; that is something that is very particular to its being finished. The static and timeless experience is in contrast to our own temporality. The static experience is an imaginary one and as such, full of possibility.

SW Harold Rosenberg talked about visual artwork as an action of the body suspended in material. This suspension strikes me as also referring to that calm or clarity, that reference to timelessness. The funny thing about the continuity of life in a body is that there are those moments of perceptual clarity which are often too few and far between. There is this sense that life is short, but it's not that short. We change, but we don't change radically enough that you are unrecognizable the next day or the next hour, or that I don't recognize myself in the mirror the next morning.

JS Yeah, thank God. (*laughter*)

SW George Steiner says that in Art no new perception cancels out old perceptions, unlike Science where a new perception invalidates an old perception. But in Art that's not so.

JS People try to make it so, the current conversation is always an attempt to try to invalidate what just happened. But that sounds good to me.

—Stephen Westfall is a painter and writer living in New York. He is represented by the Daniel Newburg Gallery.

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