



# Amy Vogel: A Paraperspective

*A collaboration with Joseph Grigely*



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**Cleve Carney Art Gallery**

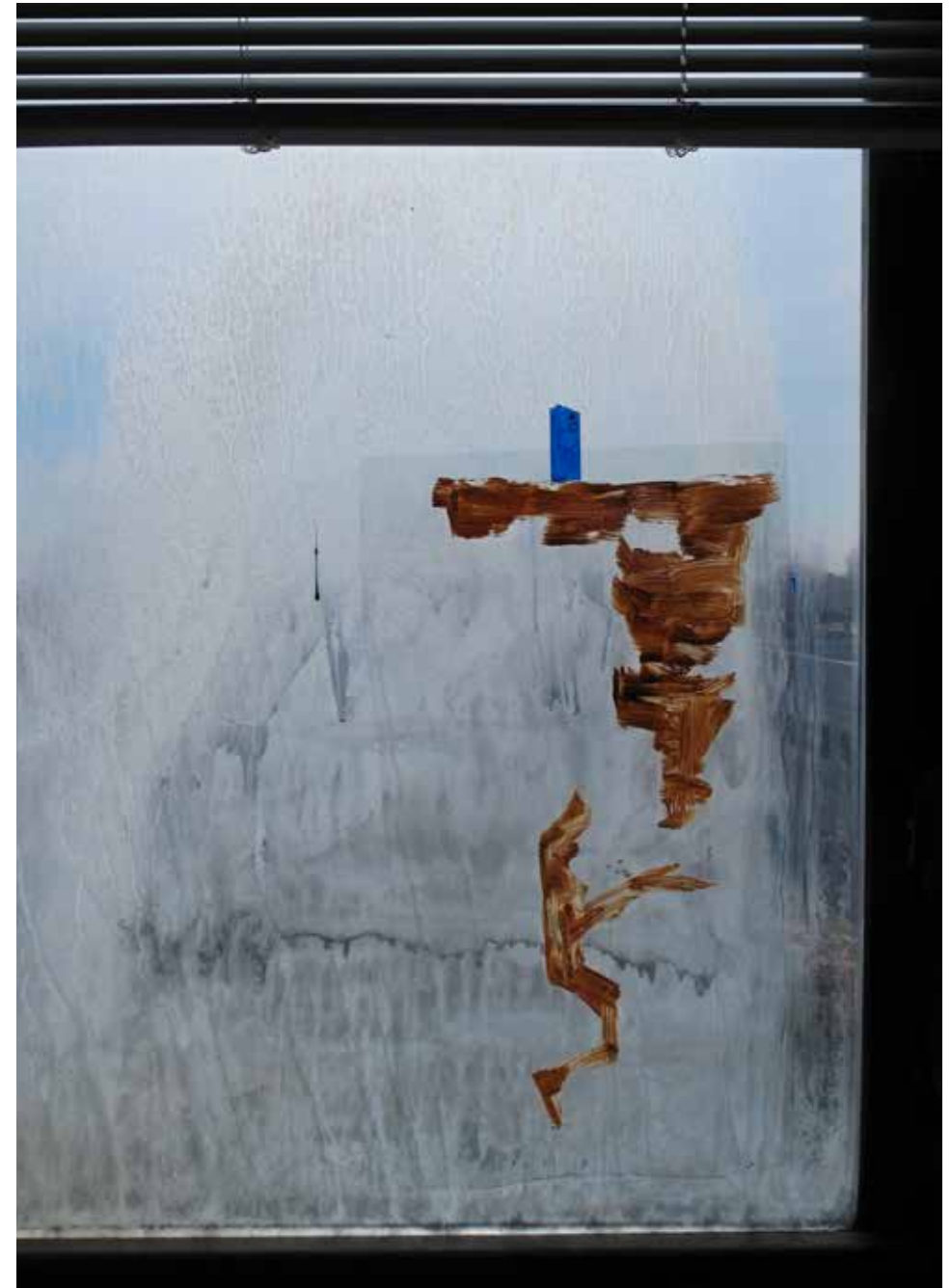
*Thursday, Sept. 4 to Saturday, Oct. 25, 2014*

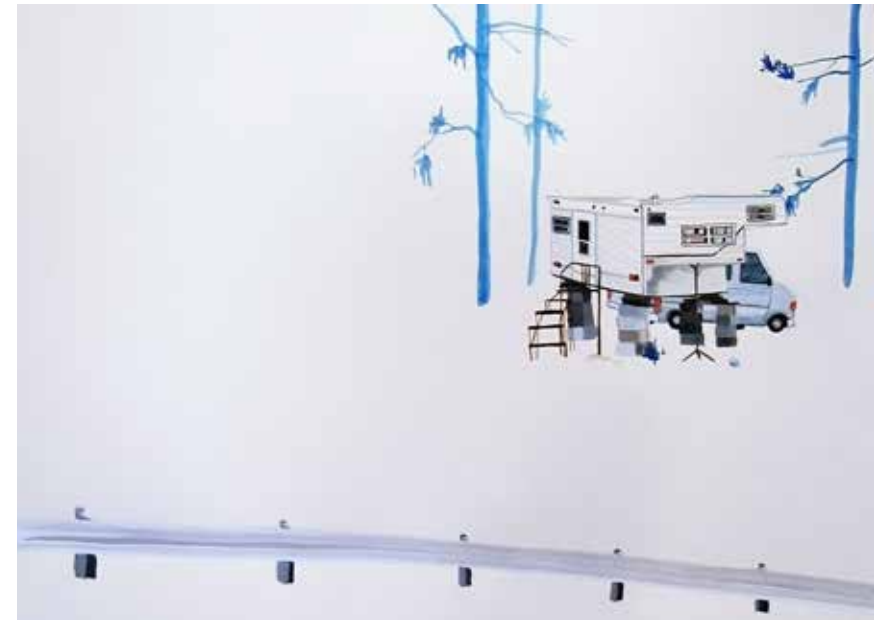
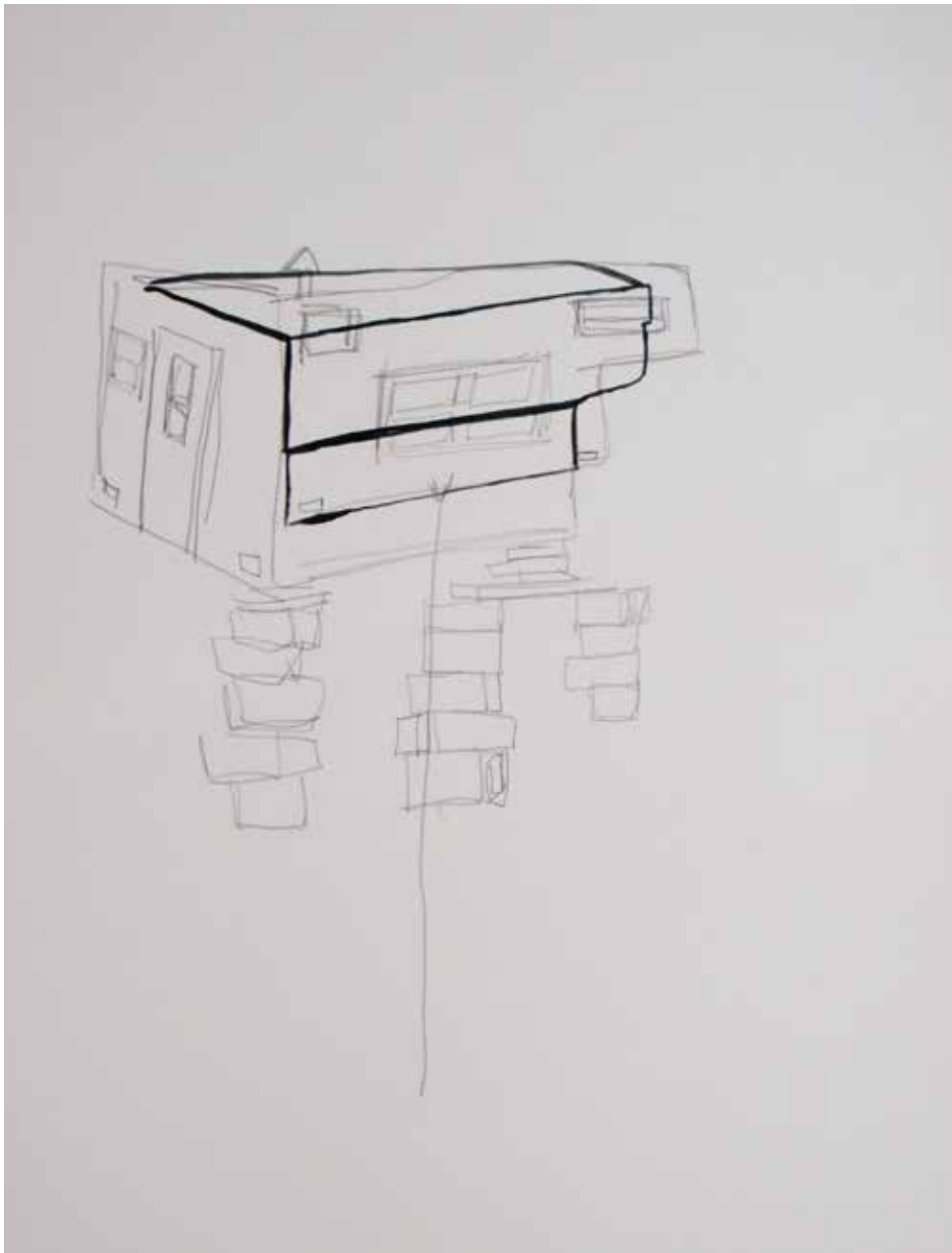
## The Paraperspective

*Amy Vogel: A Paraperspective*, is an exhibition that presents work made by Amy Vogel over a period of 15 years. The exhibition is neither a “survey” nor a “retrospective” in the usual sense of the terms. Instead, it attempts to define an historical body of work by examining both its public and private side. It is an exhibition that includes unrealized projects; projects that simply failed; experiments with different media and subjects that never got past being experiments. Some of the work, while “finished,” has never been shown before—it spends its life in storage, and is being exhibited as if in storage, where the storage rack is itself both exhibition infrastructure and sculpture. Some work is packed for shipping; some partially unpacked. The goal of the exhibition is to destabilize the very idea of an oeuvre as a definitive body, and to represent it instead as a set of unstable relations—between finished and unfinished work, between draft versions and final versions, between the signature “style” and the experimental projects, and in Vogel’s case, between individual work and collaborative projects.

*Amy Vogel: A Paraperspective* is an experiment in exhibition design, and a collaboration between Vogel and me. Vogel and I have worked closely for more than 15 years, sharing a studio together, sharing a home together, and sometimes sharing individual projects together—either as explicit collaborators, or, in some cases, implicit—for we rarely create work that does not have the input of both of us. But this is the first time we have done a single exhibition that is built up around two major interests of ours: Vogel’s work in the studio, and my academic work in the field of textual criticism, which has a particular interest in how meaning is constructed from different states of the work—as a draft, or as a finished form, or in relation to other work around it.

The exhibition combines all of these interests. It is not an exhibition that puts the materials and activities of the studio on display as a prop; rather, it is an exhibition that involves collecting and activating an eclectic array of material as a means of defining a body of work. No document or object is considered inherently unimportant because the paraperspective depends on a relational process—for example, of posing an experiment or a failed outcome beside





a work seen as finished. The paraperspective strives to unite materials that are too important as part of the work's history to throw away, and too unimportant as cultural documents to disseminate as art. In the paraperspective, the value of its components is measured in terms of how they both reveal and make meaning in relation to other components—not through their individuality. As the cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer wrote, "the historian follows two tendencies—the realistic tendency, which prompts him to get hold of all data of interest, and the formative tendency, which requires him to explain the material in hand. He is both passive and active, a recorder and a creator."<sup>1</sup>

The origins of the paraperspective can be traced to a certain kind of architectural drawing called paraline drawings, particularly axonometric drawings, which combine orthographic and perspective drawings to simulate a three-dimensional illusion of space. As the art historian George Collins observed in an essay on architectural drawings from 1983, the value of axonometric drawings is that they have "the ability to transcend the fixed

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<sup>1</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, compiled by Paul Oskar Kristeller. 1969. Rpt. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995: 47.



viewpoint of the perspective drawing and depict simultaneously spatial composition and the experience of movement through it.”<sup>2</sup> How can an exhibition likewise function to reveal the various formal and thematic trajectories that define a body of creative work?

Traditionally, this has been done through the display of archives as source material (like Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas* project), or through the display of the archive as a biographical site: Morandi’s studio in Bologna, for example, with its racks and shelves of jars and bottles. Or more recently, Francis Bacon’s entire studio—two rooms and 7,000 items ranging from old brushes and dried paint tubes and books and slashed paintings and empty crates of Krug champagne—all of which was transported from 7 Reece Mews in London to the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, where it was meticulously reconstructed.

For this exhibition the starting point is not Vogel’s studio, but her subject matter. Her work addresses our human relationship with nature—how we attempt to shape and reshape it, and use

<sup>2</sup> George R. Collins, “Architectural Drawings,” *Art & Architecture* (London: ICA, 1983): 100-101.

and abuse it, as part of the process of living as we do—either in urban or rural contexts. In Vogel’s world of nature, there is always something contaminating it, complicating it, mucking it up. There are no cathedrals of sunlight in her paintings; instead, there are wheelless trailer homes, dead rabbits, trees in burnt-out forests. There are allusions to lawn and porch ornaments of the sort you find in upstate New York: planters made from old tires, or flower boxes shaped like swans, or deer antlers nailed over garage doors. There are fox traps and beaver traps. There are chickens. It is not, by any means, a morbid world, but rather a world of complicated human emotions.

One thing that the exhibition evokes is the sense in which art is tentative, at times so close to being what we want it to be, and at other times arbitrarily unresolved. As an artist Vogel “paints” and “sculpts” and “makes,” but these verbs belie the fact that the process involves a repertoire of negating activities—unpainting as much as painting, unsculpting as much as sculpting, and unmaking as a form of making. Many of her paintings get painted over, or stripped down with paint remover, or sanded down so that only a shadow of the painting remains. Much of the work on paper gets cut up so that only fragments survive. A lot of work gets thrown out, folded into flat files, and stored in boxes or on shelves. Some of this work can be described as a failure in that it was deliberately not exhibited; but failure can be many things, and something that has failed in a most implausible or impossible way can be, for lack of a better word, beautiful. Both in art history and literature, the canon privileges the works that innovate as critical forms, and do so in a way that history regards as exemplary. But we don’t typically study a history of exemplary failure, where the failure—like Keats’ epic fragment, *Hyperion*—works in a way to draw out unique or otherwise redeeming qualities in the work.

And there is another important kind of failure, where a certain tension that comes from a work being unresolved—not sure of itself—works in a way to elide the expectations a reader or viewer might have for a piece. In a long discussion about how perfumes are composed, the French perfumer Céline Ellena explained how she would add to her formulae “a few other materials to trouble the perfume, because a perfume must not be perfect. It must



have small imperfections that give it tension.”<sup>3</sup> It is a remark somewhat like what Oshima says in Haruki Marukami’s novel *Kafka on the Shore*: “Works that have a certain imperfection to them have an appeal for that very reason.”<sup>4</sup>

One reason we see few exhibitions like the paraperspective is because we do not usually have access to the archives—particular the studio archives, and the day-to-day working process of artists—that provides so much of the material for such an exhibition, including various kinds of failures that work in a way to “trouble” the oeuvre—to borrow Ellena’s memorable phrase. The archives of living artists are active archives; unlike the archives of artists who have died, and have been enumerated and preserved within a depository, active archives lack definition. In the matter of selecting work for the show, I have gone through Vogel’s storage racks, her source materials, boxes of old photographs, folders of old checklists and correspondence. The process is not systemic; it is opportunistic. Most of Vogel’s archive, like that of many artists, is destined to be discarded.

<sup>3</sup> Chandler Burr, *The Perfect Scent* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007): 191.

<sup>4</sup> Haruki Marukami, *Kafka on the Shore* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005): 111.



As an exhibition, the paraperspective draws from the archive to better understand the generative conditions implicit to the making of art and literature. By “generative conditions,” I mean the conditions that affect the compositional process—or more generally the changes to the work that take place in the process of bringing work to the public. The temporal attributes that are germane to the active process of making—writing, drawing, erasing, and so on—are generally unacknowledged by most schools of criticism. Except, perhaps, one: genetic criticism. Genetic criticism emerged in France in the mid-1990s. It is primarily concerned with the genesis of a cultural text, and considers all available resources that might have an interpretative bearing on the revisions to a work up to the point where it is published—what is called the “avant-texte.”<sup>5</sup> Genetic criticism is more broadly interested in the compositional wastebasket—the stuff that is essentially not intended as part of the public purview of the finished work. Such conditions do not so much solve or resolve



meaning in a work as much as they might complicate it by introducing unanswered and unexplained possibilities—how the work that ended up one way might have ended up another way. And how the process involves a form of unrewriting on the part of the reader—backing up and going forward and backing up yet again—an onerous process with some writers, like Hemingway, whose novel *A Farewell to Arms* had 47 different endings before being published, not to mention at least 44 different titles. Some were pretty bad too. He tried “Love is one fervent fire” and “Education of the flesh” and “They who got shot,” but these were, as Hemingway modestly noted in the margin of his manuscript, “Shitty.”<sup>6</sup> It is a revealing truth about even the best artists: They all made shitty stuff as a necessary part of making the work for which they are best remembered.

Consider, as an example, one of the most impossibly awkward words in the history of English poetry, which occurs in the holograph of Keats’ “Ode to Psyche,” where he addresses Psyche, the Greek goddess of beauty. Keats wrote:

“O Bloomiest!”

O Bloomiest? It’s an awkward phrase, for sure; but it’s also a deliberate phrase. From Keats’ manuscripts we know he wrote it twice, in a draft and a letter, and it also appears in two transcripts made by friends. But “O Bloomiest” wasn’t the phrase that was printed when the poem was first published in 1820. Keats’ publisher discretely changed it to “O Brightest!” and “O Brightest” has been the phrase printed and reprinted in the poem for the past 194 years. The famous repository of lexicography, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, doesn’t include “bloomiest” as a legitimate word—it has bloom and bloomage and even bloomy—but no “bloomiest.”

<sup>5</sup> See Almuth Grésillon, *Eléments de critique génétique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994); *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-Textes*, ed. Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer, and Michael Groden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); and *Genetic Criticism and the Creative Process: Essays from Music, Literature, and Theater*, ed. William Kinderman and Joseph E. Jones (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, ed. Seán Hemingway (New York: Scribner, 2012): 323-4.



The crux of the argument isn't about which phrase is the better or the "shitty" choice; rather, it's a matter of addressing the fact that for Keats, the most viable choice is sometimes the choice for which there is no logic, no decorum, and no antecedent.<sup>7</sup> The literary critic Paul de Man once wrote: "There is always a strange fascination about the bad verse great poets write in their youth."<sup>8</sup> But even more fascinating is the unmisgiving verse great poets write when they are at their best. If the word "bloomiest" is flawed as a syntactic construction, it could also be said to succeed at doing the thing Keats' poetry does best: upset the equilibrium of syntactic conventions and find in a certain awkwardness a difficult kind of beauty. It was the English literary critic John Bayley who aptly observed that Keats "turns what might appear mean and embarrassing into what is rich and *disconcerting*; for at his most characteristic Keats always disconcerts."<sup>9</sup> In this regard, Keats' poetry emphatically stresses how the logic of art has little to do with the logic of rational human thought.

One might argue that only the public texts matter; how do we regard drafts and studio experiments and biographical information in relation to the public oeuvre? The New Critics in the 1940s and 1950s were adamant that biographical information and pre-publication states of a text were irrelevant to a critical assessment of the final outcome of the work. As Kenneth Wimsatt wrote in his famous essay, "The Intentional Fallacy," "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a literary work of art, and it seems to us that this is a principle which goes deep into some differences in the history of critical attitudes."<sup>10</sup> A single word entangled within a microarchive, like Keats' "Bloomiest," is not going to tell us what a poem means. It shouldn't. Instead, such a reading leads us to the sense in which art is not alone about the

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Grigely, *Textuality: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism* (Ann Arbor, Mi.: University of Michigan Press, 1995): 37-39.

<sup>8</sup> Paul de Man, "The Inward Generation," in *Critical Writings 1953-1978*, ed. Lindsay Waters (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 12.

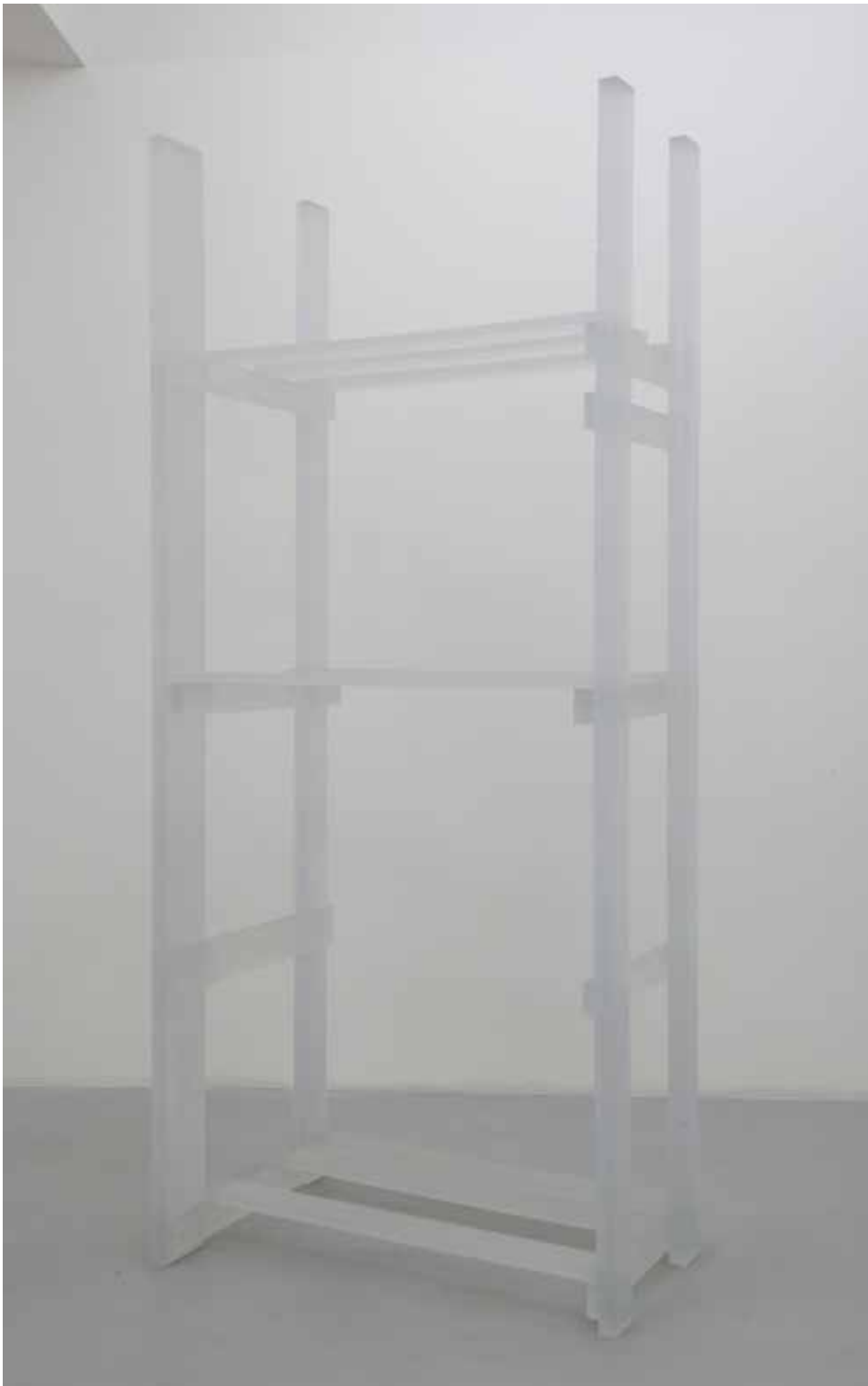
<sup>9</sup> John Bayley, *The Uses of Division: Unity and Disharmony in Literature* (New York: Viking, 1976): 115.

<sup>10</sup> W.K. Wimsatt, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954; rpt. Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1982): 3.



totality of its parts, as it is about how the parts themselves have meaning and beauty that can be read as a part of, and apart from, the whole. Within the microarchive lies considerable authority, as it lays bare the smallest nuanced moments of human agency. It is in the archive that false starts are mapped and tensions are memorialized. In the archive every hesitation and imperfection has no place to hide.

In Wallace Stevens' evocative poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" we are reminded that the perspective we bring to bear on the subject of our attention—either a blackbird or a poem or a painting—is not singular. The peregrinations that a work of art makes through space and time have a way of reflecting on the various cultural commentaries on it—and become a reflection on the interrelationship between art and the people who make it, collect it, write about it, and in some cases even banish or destroy it. Relationships like these sometimes get played out in diachronic exhibitions of a single work, where the history of the work's making and remaking is stretched out over time. The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. organized exhibitions of this sort in the early 1990s—exhibitions of Giambologna's *Cesarini Venus* (1994), Georges de La Tour's



*Repentant Magdalene* (1993), *The St. Anne Altarpiece* (1992), and the three versions of Chardin's *Soap Bubbles* (1991)—but such exhibitions are uncommon. More recently, in 2011-2012, several European and American museums presented a traveling exhibition of the annotated color studies that Josef Albers used in the process of making the series of paintings, *Homage to the Square*. Almost all of the Albers archive is in the private hands of the Josef & Anni Albers Foundation—it was never meant for public view.<sup>11</sup> In part because of this—taking so much that is private to the public—it was a groundbreaking exhibition. Albers was fastidious as an experimenter, testing different shadings of a single color in order to get an outcome he wanted. His studies reveal many cancelled possibilities that were unrealized as final forms, yet work in a way to inform those final forms. One of his color studies is captioned: “try again.” It’s like Keats struggling with the word “tinge” in “The Eve of St. Agnes,” where his manuscript draft reveals he tried to use it three times before giving up. Microarchives like these are revealing because they concentrate our attention on the minute moments of making. It can be an unmeasurably brief moment, or it can stretch out to two decades or more, as it did for Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, and for Christo in the *Wrapped Reichstag*. “Making” is somewhat underacknowledged and understudied as a form of art history. We can never quite know, let alone articulate, all the practical and impractical reasonings and feelings that go into the making of any specific work of art. Yet, in our inexorable longing for meaning and understanding, if not also for closure, we do not easily let go of this desire. In one of his essays, Edgar Allan Poe wrote: “I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would—that is to say, who could—detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion.”<sup>12</sup>

This is what I call the Rumpelstiltskin complex. It reflects on our part a desire to know how straw can be spun into gold, and how the ordinary elements of everyday life become art. We want to

<sup>11</sup> *Paintings on Paper: Josef Albers in America*, ed. Heinz Liesbrock and Michael Semff (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” in *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Rufus Griswold (New York: J.S. Redfield, 1850) II: 260.

see just how the magic works, and it is in the margins of making—in letters and journals and drafts of poems, and in the detritus of memorialized studios like Bacon’s and Morandi’s, that we want to find the answers.

But the answer is that there are no answers, just an overwhelming sense of possibility. The paraperspective’s task is to present a deliberate set of proximal relations as a form of intertextuality: a process of constant comparative relations. In Vogel’s case, it tries in particular to narrate transitions—from one medium to another, from one genre to another, from one way of working to another—taking at times disparate and unrelated fragments, and recombining them into something new that is not just the sum of its parts, but a reflection on the parts in relation to the whole.

—Joseph Grigely

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**Joseph Grigely** is an artist and writer. His recent exhibitions include the 2014 Whitney Biennial; Centre Pompidou, Metz; CAPC, Bordeaux; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Leipzig; and Palais de Tokyo, Paris. His publications include *Textualterity* (1995), *Blueberry Surprise* (2006) and *Exhibition Prosthetics* (2010). He is professor and chair of the Department of Visual & Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

**Amy Vogel** lives and works in Chicago, where she is assistant professor in the Department of Contemporary Practices at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has exhibited with Larissa Goldston, New York; Paul Kotula Projects, Detroit; and Air de Paris, Paris.



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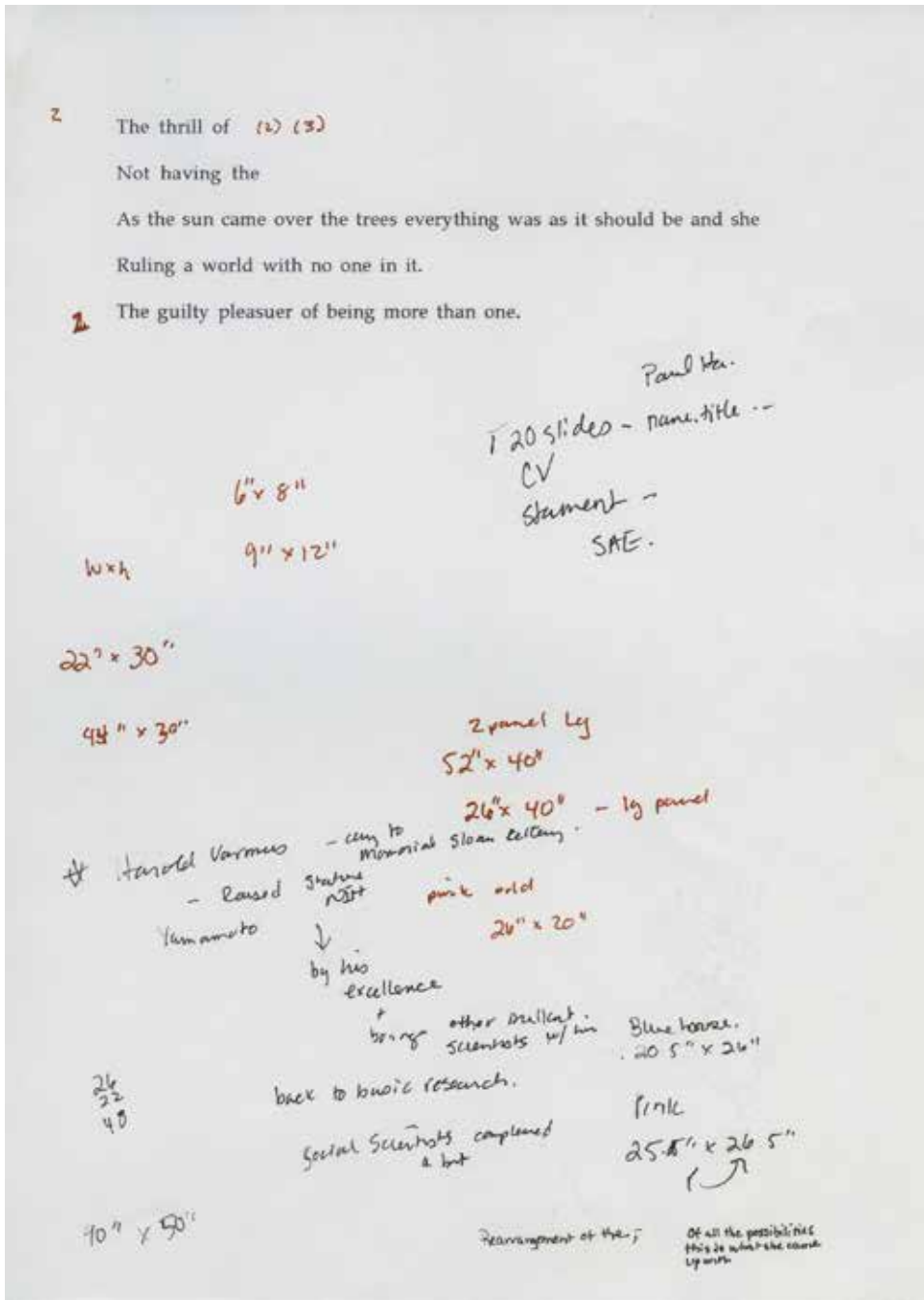
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**Barbara Wiesen**

Director and Curator  
Cleve Carney Art Gallery

# Images



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