

May 3rd - June 16th 2013

# Properties

Lyndl Hall  
Devon Knowles  
Erica Stocking  
Erdem Taşdelen

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*If you will only be so good as to open up your memories of felt time, there will rise the new cathedral.*

-Julia Kristeva

The property that I grew up on provided early schooling in the impenetrable relationship between visible and invisible forces in objects and environments. There were two wonderfully gnarled apple trees in the front yard. Every year the trees would bear fruit, but because of seepage from a defunct battery factory nearby, there were unsafe levels of lead in the soil, so every fall my brother and I watched the apples ripen and then drop to the ground and rot. The apples in their inedibility were encountered differently.

Lying on my back under the largest tree just after the first few apples were on the ground, I would wonder about my chances of getting hit. I had conflated the stories of Issac Newton and Rip Van Winkle, and I was certain that if an apple fell on my head I would fall asleep for years and wake up with a beautiful epiphany. No matter how long I spent lingering in the mottled sunlight under the tree, I never once saw an apple fall of its own volition. But still over time the ground would become covered with pungent celestial orbs, and the smell would colour my afternoon daydreams.

Occasionally we would try utilizing the apples in the form of shrunken apple head puppets, or for juggling practice, but inevitably, most of the fruit would be slowly consumed by insects

and birds or absorbed back into the soil. While inedible, those apples still live for me in a complex network of nature and culture, a space where the unknowable thing merged with the threads that bind individual and collective memory to create alternate possibilities of understanding.

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The artists in the exhibition *Properties* engage similar modes of encounter through cultural interventions in material worlds. Through attention to particular forms and working methods, their acts of creation also involve elements of recreation and commemoration. In *Properties* artworks become conduits for the resonant characteristics and mnemonic traces embedded in objects and environments.

Erica Stocking's work in *Properties* evolved from responses to both her immediate surroundings and her cultural influences. Alternately stacked rectangles of drywall held together with brass pegs form a folding screen, strips of coloured fabric strung together to form a brightly coloured carpet with an angular geometric design, and a deck chair is made from found wood and a canvas tarp.

The three works are influenced by the artist's study of Modern-Movement architecture, and especially the work of the furniture designer and architectural pioneer, Eileen Gray (1878-1976). Gray was in dialogue with Le Corbusier, and Adolf Loos among others, but she was suspicious of the all-encompassing theoretical claims that were common in the discourse surrounding Modern-Movement architecture and "...sought to overcome the

dehumanizing qualities often associated with abstraction by engaging the subjective qualities of experience.”<sup>1</sup> As she articulated in a conversation with Romanian architect Jean Badovici: “It is by interpreting the desires, passions and tastes of the individual that one will best interpret social life and collective order.”<sup>2</sup>

Taking inspiration from Gray, Stocking made works that made sense for her own family’s social lives. These works are part of a large project in which the artist uses traces of potentially discarded materials around her house to create new and potentially *useful* aesthetic objects. Stocking’s screen, titled *Screen 404 E. Pender* is based directly on Gray’s famous *Brick* screen, but rather than painted or lacquered wood, Stocking constructed it out of drywall salvaged from the walls of her house after a small renovation. In her sketchbook, Stocking found a drawing by her partner with the words *To My Sweetheart* written under it – this is the design that later became the carpet. She collected her family’s old clothing that was too worn to wear or pass on and made a latch hook rug after the design that was left for her. *Deck Chair 404 E. Pender* was made of a banister that was no longer needed on her staircase, and old canvas that was no longer needed in her studio.

This kind of cyclical production and creative labour offers complex terrain for considering the common “value” of art. In his essay on art collector, activist and scholar Edward Fuchs, Walter Benjamin highlights problems embedded in the alienation of the arts from their modes of production: “The concept of culture—as the embodiment of creations considered

independent, if not of the production process in which they originate, then of a production process in which they continue to survive—has a fetishistic quality. Culture appears reified.”<sup>3</sup> Stocking’s domestic *gesamkunstwerk* (total work of art) folds her life-world into her art practice and evokes a kind of reverse reification that suggests that if we treat people like things (as is the norm in advanced capitalism) we should treat the things around us with the greatest possible care. While no publically encountered artworks are immune to the forces of cultural capital, Stocking’s works complicate trajectories of reception and consumption: the three artworks will return to their active lives in the artist’s home after the six week long exhibition.

Interactions with artworks and the spaces that house them are multi-sensory experiences that draw not only on the broad phenomenological responses during moments of encounter, but also the immediate forces of intellection, memory and imagination. Through both material and textual language, artworks have the potential to simultaneously speak to past, present and future contexts.

Hovering in a zone between object and architecture Devon Knowles’ leadlight sculpture *It’s Only Forever* spans the width of the gallery, four and a half meters across and three meters in the air. The physical core of the work is an aluminum theatrical lighting truss, which is sheathed in leaded glass that has been collected from off-cuts from all of the artist’s previous stained glass works. In a pattern called courthouse steps, vertically oriented clear rectangular glass panels are imbricated with horizontal rectangles of marbled reds,

blues, greens, browns and others. Among the traces of her past work are off cuts from her sculpture *Goldenrod Balls*, which showed in the exhibition *Re-Skilling* at the Western Front in 2008. Drawing from the history of her own work, *It's Only Forever* also exposes the structural history of the Western Front building itself as it pierces the walls on either side of the gallery exposing a hidden window to the East side of the room and an old growth fir beam on the West side. Light filters in from the East and refracts like a kaleidoscope that links the exterior world with the unknown spaces inside the walls of the institution.

Considering the architectural presence of the work we can go even further back in time, when in Vancouver, the cathedral of old growth trees from which the Western Front was built were still standing, and in Europe the Nineteenth Century was looking to glass as a material of revolutionary potential. Train stations and arcades were built with elaborate glasswork developed from even more ancient styles and influences, including Italian Renaissance, Byzantine, Moorish, and Medieval, and frequently evoking primordial forms in nature. As W.G. Sebald describes Antwerpen Centraal station in his book *Austerlitz*: "As we step into the entrance hall we are seized by a sense of being beyond the profane, in a cathedral consecrated to international traffic and trade...it was in fact a logical stylistic approach to the epoch."<sup>4</sup> Designed in the service of industry and capital these structures appear to have sprouted organically from the ground as if glass and iron vines and leaves grew to form the perfect canopies for shops and trains. They suggested industrial progress as a natural phenomenon, but also could be seen

as soothsayers of ruin: vestiges of modern life already returned to the earth and grown over.

Knowles' hand-constructed glasswork avoids the organic and ornate aesthetics so common to the medium, as it takes its basic design from a simple step pattern, and yet dialectically encrusts the product of an individual's creative labour against an industrially produced aluminum lighting support beam. Craft, however, has its own industry, and Knowles' acknowledges this by leaving original price tags and barcode stickers on some of the scraps of glass she employed. This conversation between modes of production and presentation too will fall into ruin. At the end of the exhibition the work will be buried under the foundation of the Western Front building.

If we imagine a time in the future when the ruins of the Western Front are excavated, and everyday archeologists look to the past through material traces of history, we might foresee a strange encounter with a beam of metal and glass that seems out of time and place for any kind of logical material history of the building, but in just the right place to tell the story of a institution that housed an active practice of art production and display. In the same spirit, we might also try to imagine what the artist will find when burying her work in the same area that the original, pre-Western Front residents of the building, the secret society of the *Pythian* brotherhood, kept coffins for their funeral services. When burying something for the future, who knows what will be found of the past? It's unlikely there will be bones or treasures, but even in the act of digging up soil that settled under this old house for almost one hundred years, Knowles will unearth the

potential of remembering that which we never knew in the first place.

Often considered the first historian, Ancient Greek Scholar Herodotus (443 B.C.) not only unearthed, compiled and narrativized the past, but he also observed and recorded the history of charting time. Referring to early methods he stated: "It was from the Babylonians that the Greeks learned concerning the pole, the gnomon, and the twelve parts of the day"<sup>5</sup> Here he was, of course, referring to early sundials that only accounted for daylight hours. From these early timepieces to modern digital devices, the longing to delineate time seems like an almost innate human desire. Lyndl Hall's contribution to *Properties* complicates this desire to position ourselves temporally and spatially. A slim cherry wood stand with a sand-cast bronze sundial resting on it bears the words "Whilst beholding you become old". Titled *Sundial for Margaret Gatty*, the dial is set specifically to be read in the geographic location of Vancouver BC: according to Hall the gnomon is engineered to sit at 49 degrees, which is the latitude of the city, and the angles and spacing of the hour and minute lines correspond to the movement of the sun at this point in space. The sculpture is oriented in the gallery towards North and locates the viewer within a North-South East-West axis linking the stable object to an invisible network of radiating geometric lines.<sup>6</sup> However, since the sundial will never receive direct sunlight in the gallery it cannot tell time, and evokes an aporia of temporal desire.

While expressing the passing of time, the work also commemorates Margaret Gatty (1809–1873) the British writer known for her

extensive research on interests as eclectic as seaweeds and sundials. In *The Book of Sundials*, which she published the year before her death, she described over 350 sundials from across Britain and Europe. Particular interest was taken in the mottos inscribed on them, including the one that Hall borrowed for this work. As sundials are often situated in church courtyards or graveyards, the mottos are often described as epitaphs or meditations on the passing of time and as felt through the forces of nature.

In recent years, opportunities and spaces for the leisurely contemplation of time seem less and less common, and, from the schoolyard bell to the punch clock, since the Industrial Revolution the marking of time has an inherently disciplinary aspect to it. The sundial, with its thought-provoking epitaph and its direct reliance on natural forces, speaks to an earlier conception of time as something less defined. Since there is no direct sunlight on Hall's sundial, the artist invites us to consider the words 'Whilst beholding you become old' and imagine the passing of time as something that be both read and felt. Here we find sensations imprinted in signs. These malleable encounters are akin to the experience of being so fully immersed in reading that one begins to internalize the author's thoughts and lets them intersect with their own. Psychoanalyst and theorist Julia Kristeva describes this experience, activated through the writings of Marcel Proust, as "... sensations which gush out from the signs and signal themselves to me. But since bringing things together is a metaphor, and sensation implies a body, Proustian time, which brings together the sensations imprinted in signs,

is a metamorphosis.”<sup>7</sup> This translation of experience from the author’s expression of sensation to the readers perception allows for an embodied encounter with text. The reader doesn’t feel the same time expressed through perception as the author describes, but feels time nevertheless.

This relationship between signs, culture and the body is further explored in Erdem Taşdelen’s audio work *You, You, You* which is installed in a separate room in the gallery. Here all that is encountered is a spotlight and two speakers. However, upon stepping into the spotlight a motion detector is activated and the visitor experiences a disjointed barrage of musical utterances of the word you. In fact, you would hear every ‘you’ in pop singer Kylie Minogue’s entire discography, if you stayed and listened long enough. By highlighting the sheer amount of beckoning that occurs in a single pop singers oeuvre, Taşdelen foregrounds the way that pop culture directs the narrative the towards the consumer. But how much do we yield to the beckoning?

Taking into account that many of the *you*s uttered would be directed towards an imaginary love interest, it seems likely that in the context of the complete narrative use of the ‘you’ would actually be asking us to empathize with the ‘I’ saying the ‘you’. We can’t compare the work of Kylie Minogue to that of Marcel Proust, but given the fact that the writing of Proust has directly inspired a number of Taşdelen’s other projects, it is worth looking again to Julia Kristeva and her analysis of the personal pronoun in Proust’s work: “*I* invites you to do as *I* does. Read me, and you will be

part of the world but without being taken in by it. *I* can give you the Divine Comedy of the life of the psyche, not just mine, but yours as well, ours, that is, the absolute.”<sup>8</sup>

The use of ‘I’ in the hands of a master like Proust invites readers to participate on an almost spiritual level. Addressing someone as ‘you’ allows no such nuanced potential, but in the context of pop music with its infectious repetition, the listener does eventually yield to the narrative of love. In Taşdelen’s installation the melodic mechanisms of pop music are negated, but the sheer multitude of decontextualised ‘yous’ does point to a labour of love. The artist painstakingly extracted ‘yous’ from every song where they were present (all but two) in Minogue’s 25 year-long career. This work creates an ephemeral encounter that directs attention to a particular object: the visitor’s own body. Stepping into the spotlight after encountering a number of different artworks that point to the relationships between thoughts and histories that live and breathe in the walls and objects, Taşdelen’s work reminds us that our own bodies too are containers for meaning.

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As children we first come to truly understand our bodies as semi- autonomous from the people and objects that surround us when we begin to give other things names. During this process we set in motion a chain of relations that link all future encounters with material *properties* to the first things we encountered and designated. The spaces we inhabited most as our language developed in childhood colour

all later interactions with space.

The road I lived on as a child had the wonderfully materialist name: “Jinglepot”. The area is riddled with abandoned coalmines, and Jinglepot Road acquired its name from the old miners practice of putting a rock in a cooking pot and jingling it when a shift was over and it was time to raise the elevator back to the surface. Our house was an old coalminer’s place and I often wondered about its former inhabitants who spent their days digging up rocks deep underground.

In 1994 the City of Nanaimo expropriated our property and house in order to straighten Jinglepot Road so that it could connect with the municipality’s new inner route highway. After we left, our house was immediately torn down, and now a highway connector runs through our former back yard. The only traces of our time there are the two apple trees that remain on the property producing uneaten fruit year after year.

- Jesse Birch

<sup>4</sup> Sebald, Winfried G., *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 2001). 10

<sup>5</sup> Herodotus quoted in Gatty, Margaret Scott *The Book of Sun-dials*, H. K. F. Eden and Eleanor Lloyd eds. (London: George Bell & Sons, 1900). Sourced online at: <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/gatty/sundials/title-page-150.jpeg> accessed April 30, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Email conversation with the artist.

<sup>7</sup> Kristeva, Julia, *Proust and the Sense of Time*, trans. Stephen Bann (NY: Columbia University Press, 1993). 7

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>1</sup> Constant, Caroline *Eileen Gray* (London: Phaidon, 2007). 7

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 8

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin. Walter: “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian” *Selected Writings Vol. 3*, eds. Marcus Paul Bullock, and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Jennings, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002). 267

# List of Works

1. Devon Knowles, *It's Only Forever*, 2013 - ∞, leaded glass, aluminum, paper, 1' X 15.5' X 1'.

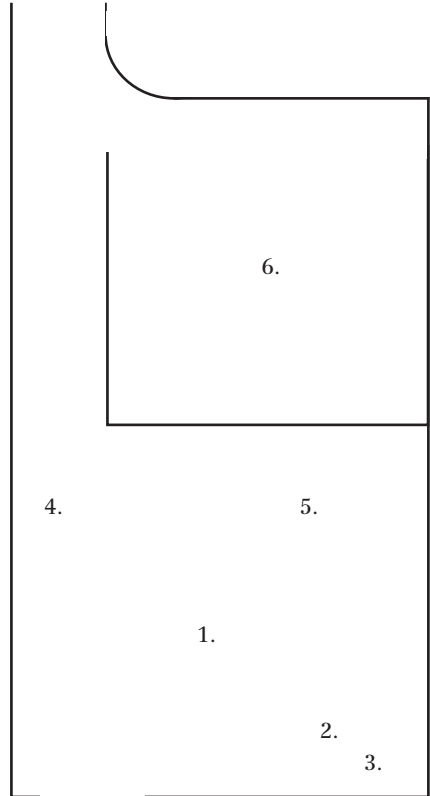
2. Erica Stocking  
*To My Sweetheart*  
A sketch found in my notebook  
A latch hook rug base  
Worn out clothes from family  
2011

3. Erica Stocking  
*Deck Chair 404 E. Pender*  
Frame: Stair banister remove  
Upon moving in  
Canvas weathered on the deck  
2011

4. Erica Stocking  
*Screen 404 E. Pender*  
Image of Eileen Gray screen  
Drywall from my house  
Brass pins hold it together  
2011

5. Lyndl Hall, *Sundial for Margaret Gatty*, 2013, bronze, wood.

6. Erdem Tasdelen, *You You You*, 2012, webcam-operated motion detector, spot lights and speakers.



**\*The exhibition will be accompanied by a public presentation by LA based artist and writer Margaret Haines on May 28th at 8pm at the Western Front.**