

Strangers and Those We Hold Dear

With Charlotte Posenenske, Katie West, Malin Arnell and Miyeon Lee

Curated by Eloise Sweetman, 5-26 October 2019

Prologue

We need to take a critical look at ourselves and what we want our lives to be — not in some future or ideal sense (hope is often thought of as future-oriented) but in the act of living, the ordinary elements of everyday life. This requires a 'spark' of hope — a hope that does not narrow our visions of the world but instead allows different histories, memories and experiences to enter into present conversations on revolution, freedom and our cultural senses of belonging.¹

Strangers and Those We Hold Dear grew out of discussions with my students in the Netherlands who were scared to be wrong at times when they should be allowed to make mistakes. On the other hand, they are self-organising and stand together against injustice and in defence of their rights and the rights of others. They are both courageous and frightened. Globally, we hear the collective voice of younger generations demanding social, political and environmental change for their society – for our society. Their actions are full of hope. In hope lies a responsibility to face the world, and an attentiveness to our effects on and interactions with each other. Inspired by the students, and the participating artists, *Strangers and Those We Hold Dear* is a reminder that our everyday actions (be they environmentally, socially, culturally or politically oriented) make a difference, even if we cannot see or know the impact. Togetherness with strangers and those we hold dear is for the present. The 'we' in the title is essential as the exhibition speaks with and as a 'we'. To us, now.

The art practices of Charlotte Posenenske, Katie West, Malin Arnell and Miyeon Lee span geographies and generations, from 1960s Germany to contemporary Australia by way of South Korea, Sweden and Switzerland. They share rich, generous and powerful practices that invite audiences to feel hope by finding trust in each other, society and the environment. In their different ways, the artists lay bare their personal impact on their surroundings through the act of living and making art. As such, the exhibition echoes Deborah Bird Rose and Val Plumwood by insisting that knowledge arises through participation and experimentation:

The quest for poetic forms of writing articulates her [Val Plumwood] understanding that inside a world of dynamic inter-action, knowledge arises through participation; to "make room" for others, one needs to do more than represent. Somehow, one needs to vivify, to leap across imaginative realms, to connect, to empathize, to be addressed and to be brought into gratitude.²

If hope is action, then participation is vital. It is not a surprise that social participation in Charlotte Posenenske's 1960s Germany is vastly different from participation in our contemporary moment in Australia, South Korea, Sweden and Switzerland. And yet, much is the same: racism, misogyny, homophobia, greed and the destruction of the environment. My students show me that in order to hope, I need to turn up, be humble and make room. The exhibiting artists similarly impart this lesson through their practices and do so by extending an invitation to participate in their work in joyful, complex and difficult ways so as to make room for voices, bodies and entities not before able, ever visible, or no longer present.

Strangers and Those We Hold Dear searches for an orientation. It connects to a place, to an identity and to a belonging. The artworks encourage us to take a position in the moments between comfort and discomfort; a position that asks us to take responsibility for what we put out into the world. Position-making is as crucial as the ability to change, as we experience and learn with and from the world. The artworks embody this flux, making *Strangers and Those We Hold Dear* a continuous reconfiguration.

¹ Mary Zournasi, *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*, (Pluto Press Australia: Melbourne, 2002), p. 18.

² Deborah Bird Rose, 'Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism: Attentive Interactions in the Sentient World,' *Environmental Humanities* Vol. 3, No. 1 (May 2013): 93-109.

Charlotte Posenenske

Every couple of years, Charlotte Posenenske's artworks return to remind me of the art institution, its relationship with the audience and its agency as an institutional barometer. For a short period in her life, Posenenske was a landscape painter, costume designer and theatre-set maker, as well as a minimalist sculptor. After passing away from cancer at fifty, she left behind an extensive archive and body of work administered by her widower and my friend, Burkhard Brunn. She was driven to make artwork that would encourage and change society. Minimalism enabled her to express her principles for an equal society: economy, rationality and accessibility. Her factory-produced sculptures in steel and cardboard synergised her commitment to built and industrial environments. Posenenske knew how to take a position. She was methodical and deliberate, setting clear parameters for her pieces. In the final years of her artistic career, Posenenske began to slowly release control of the production and presentation of her pieces.

Posenenske's *Series DW Square Tubes* (1967) is present in the exhibition. Reminiscent of ventilation shafts, made of corrugated cardboard, the work is infinite and continuously reconfiguring, built and rebuilt by many hands. It cannot be made alone because of its size, requiring shared labour and shared decision-making with the exhibition team and, at times, with the audience. It is an artwork cared for in the open, and takes a literal and conceptual position. Her intention was for the work to be variable, where each presentation takes a different unique form but one still connected to the other forms that came before and that will come after. She and those that reconfigure the works cannot know what will come. It is therefore a work for the present.

Eventually Posenenske disappeared from the art world entirely in order to become a sociologist. Leaving in 1968, she was frustrated that art could not change the urgent problems in society. I am sorry that Posenenske will never understand the profound effect her work has on me. Her works have enabled me to navigate institutional infrastructures and push against them. As I continue to curate Posenenske's work, I meet many people who have also changed the way they see the world, the way they work with audiences and the way they make artworks and exhibitions public due to her legacy. The most exciting aspect of art is its ability to permeate not only the space in which it is housed but also its impact on the people that work around it and attend to it.

Miyeon Lee

Lee's work went from painting highly detailed works of architecture to abstracted domestic interiors. Now she paints the landscape surrounding the homes that she lives in or remembers. She creates large, vector-like paintings that are regularly site-specific by adapting to the exhibition space, landscape or home. Her practice leads audiences to think deeply about what home is, particularly in times of hardship. It asks what ailing family members or living at a distance might mean for us in a connected world. Lee often uses digital means to paint large-scale works, pushing the digital through the hand at a precisely imprecise rate. Her paintings and works on paper have the tactility and lightness of an imperfect vector. In her new landscape drawing, *Pink Fear* (2019), the graphic lines reduce her environment in order for her to take some control over a surround that is personally unknown. Her charged emotional connection to her surroundings influences the choice of brushstroke, and the selection of colour is an attempt to control the anxiety that looms over her. For *Calanda at gpm* (2019), Lee employs a technique new to her – wet-on-wet acrylic – to create the scene of a sunset pulling across the sky with two fat, fluffy clouds. Lee does not remember drawing *Untitled* in 2016, a mountain that looks just like the mountains she lives between now in Switzerland, but it is remarkably familiar to her, perhaps persisting as a memory from her home in South Korea. She is therefore also giving way to the improvisation present in memory construction. Water, mountain, tree, sky – these all give space to hope and to trust.

Katie West

Katie West and Miyeon Lee often invite the audience to sit with them, to breathe and to drink some tea. West's artworks also call for society to operate in different ways. They do so by offering audiences a place to meditate, or to rest, read, talk and to enact their connection to life and to the environment. Her installations, composed of handmade fabric and collections of dried wild plants, speak directly to the improvisation and sensitivity of hope. To make her pieces, Katie works with the landscape by making pigments and dyes to create her textiles. In recent work, she gives the elements control over the textile by laying out her fabrics under the sky and on the ground. The work is made together with the elements.

Her work invites their participation, and also at the same time called to participate, and in some way by doing so removes her individual hand from the work.

Like Lee, West works wet-on-wet to make her pieces, which appear at times like the sky, like the earth, with the under layers coming through like memory. West does not paint the landscape, her work is more akin to minimalism; not intended to be anything more or less than what it is. Her works *Warna*, *Hold* and *Pieces* (2018) are included in the exhibition, comprising one by one metre pieces of hand-dyed calico. The works speak to the division and marking of country into one square metre segments primed for real estate. Country becoming property, a mechanistic and calculated endeavour. In the past, *Warna* has been installed on the floor marking the very ground that it speaks to and comes from. Each piece can be folded, carried, and continued as their edges are raw and unhemmed. By doing so, she also gives the artworks room to breathe.

Malin Arnell

Arnell was supposed to travel to Australia for the exhibition. Our original idea was to present her action *Slow Dancing With Two Fans* (2014/2018). In this work, alongside slow-spinning industrial fans, Arnell and an audience member dance to the sound of the fan for as long as the audience member desires. The work offers an alternative entry point into exhibitions, asking for tenderness, quiet motion and hope. It asks what happens if we slow dance with each other as a way of participating in a community? How does that change our interactions with our neighbours, strangers on the street and those we hold dear? Yet in the end, we decided to not show the work as we realised that the costs to both the environment and Malin's body were out of step with the ethics inherent to her work and the larger exhibition.

Instead, the audio installation *Sometimes, Sometimes, Sometimes* (2013) is presented emitting the re/de/territorialisation of the queer feminist body. Arnell describes the work as friendship, desire and attentiveness to those relationships. Although Arnell is absent, part of her is still present in the denim jacket hanging on a clothes hook in the exhibition space – a second element of the work. The jacket is the only figure, and at times is the only body in the exhibition. The jacket is worn, loved. Arnell encourages the audience to take hold of the work, to take the headphones out of the pocket and place them in their ears. The voice in the audio sometimes submits to the ambient noise in the background, only to reemerge with clarity, sometimes punctuating, sometimes disorientating the listener and the text. Arnell uses non-reading to find alternative paths, methods and strategies to engage with the world. This method resists the white male canon, as in the case of *Sometimes, Sometimes, Sometimes* the script is made from the rearranged lines of Deleuze & Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* – a two-volume work inspired by the Parisian student riots in 1968, the same year Charlotte Posenenske left the art world. *Sometimes, Sometimes, Sometimes* invites the audience to trust in the present by offering a space of wonder and a feeling that there are entities around and inside us that we cannot see or hear but are there and which affects us.

Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists adopt the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It is the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterwards either, but they matter all the same, and history is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone.³

Epilogue

'Hopelessness?,' my partner proposes to me.
'If you're saying that hope is about being together in community, then being totally alone would be hopelessness, don't you think?'

I get the shaky-worries at that moment just before sleep. My eyes fly open and my heart lifts off and I have to get up. I can't breathe. The shaky-worries are something that I know really well as I have had them since I was a kid. Back then I thought that once everyone in the world went to sleep, I would be the only one awake. Lying in bed, I would wait. Waiting to be left alone. I don't know where the worry

³ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark* (Nation Gate: New York, 2004), p. 34

Charlotte Posenenske (1930-1985, Germany) is one of the most important German minimalist artists. Posenenske departed from the idea that art should be created by and for individuals, insisting instead that it should be a social act with as significant an impact as possible. Concepts such as changeability, participation and collaboration are central in her oeuvre. They originated from her conviction that art could influence social interaction or could draw attention to social inequality. Since her death in 1985, Posenenske's work has been brought to a broader public through major solo exhibitions, including at Frankfurt Museum of Modern Art, Documenta II, Kassel; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Haus Konstruktiv, Zürich; Artists Space, New York; DIA Foundation, New York; and Kröller-Müller Museum, the Netherlands.

Katie West (b. 1988, Western Australia) is a Yindjibarndi woman who combines naturally dyed textiles, installation and social practice to formulate ways to practice custodianship in still colonised and ecologically compromised contexts. West's first significant commission Decolonist (2016), produced for Next Wave Festival, utilised meditation as a means to decolonise the self. In 2017, she completed a Master of Contemporary Art at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, where she was awarded the Dominik Mersch Gallery Award and the Falls Creek Resort Indigenous Award. West also collaborates with artist Fayen d'Evie through their project Museum Incognita, which revisits neglected, concealed or obscured histories, activates embodied readings and archives ephemeral artworks and practices.

Malin Arnell (b. 1970, Sweden) is an interdisciplinary artist, researcher, educator and frequent collaborator with other artists, activists and writers. Through her practice, she explores critical issues for participating in [social] environments by emphasising matter, doing and actions, focusing on the experiences around/in/through/of the body [my body, their body, our body] through the incorporation of affectivity between relationalities, territories and power. Her collaboration and works have been exhibited internationally including at Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Index - The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation, Stockholm; Institute of Contemporary Art, London; Swiss Institute, New York; EFA Project Space, New York; White Columns, New York; The Kitchen, New York; Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, New York; CCS Bard Galleries/Hessel Museum of Art, New York; and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, among others.

Miyeon Lee (b. 1980, South Korea) uses painting, design and food as her mediums to reassess uncertainty, displacement and personal and societal views on the notion of 'home'. She graduated with a Master's degree in painting from the School of Visual Arts in New York City in 2011. Lee was an artist-in-residence in the Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. She has shown at PLATO, Ostrava; SeMA, Seoul; Ilmin Museum, Seoul; Brakke Grond, Amsterdam; Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht; KyumJae JungSun Museum, Seoul; C-Mine, Genk; Looiersgracht 60, Amsterdam; and Gallery Sobab, YangPyeong. Her first solo exhibition was held at Tick Tack, Antwerp, earlier this year.

Eloise Sweetman (b. 1985, Western Australia) investigates systems and degrees of exchange where ideas, methodologies, discussion and materials are made active, radiate out and extend beyond the exhibition walls. These exchanges result in exhibitions, publications, talk-based programs and performances, as well as audio and video works. She is a theory lecturer at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam, and was an artist-in-residence at the Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht. Along with artist Jason Hendrik Hansma, she is the co-director of Shimmer, an exhibition and events space and an online platform in the Port of Rotterdam. Recent projects and collaborations have been with A Tale of A Tub, Rotterdam; Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Turning A Blind Eye: São Paulo Biennial, São Paulo; De Appel, Amsterdam; and Political Arts Initiative, worldwide. She holds a Master of Fine Arts from the School of Missing Studies at the Sandberg Institute, Amsterdam, and a Master of Arts in Arts Management from the University of the Arts, Utrecht, and Open Universities, London.

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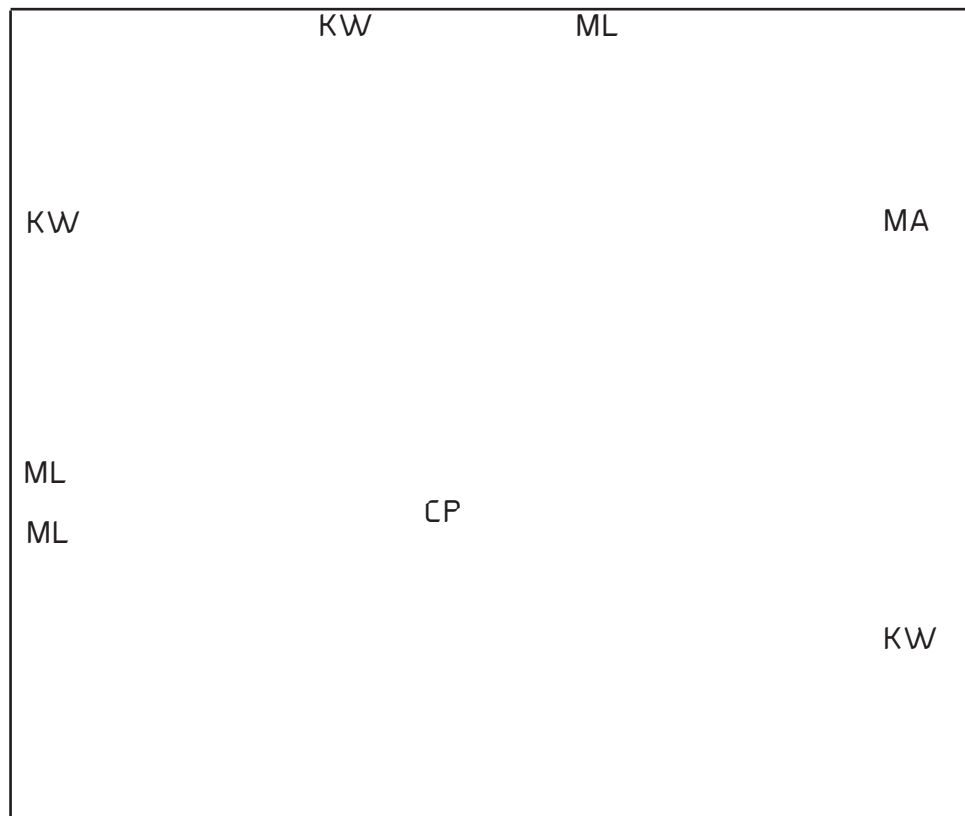
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Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the Kulin Nations, on whose land this exhibition sits. I pay my respects to their Elders, past, present, and future. I send my thanks to the artists, Estate of Charlotte Posenenske, Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, Isabelle Sully, David Egan, Emma Nixon, Jodie Clarke, Joseph Dawson, Melanie Flynn, Jason Hendrik Hansma, Tara McDowell, MADA, Monash University. Without the coming together of these bodies and minds, this exhibition would not be possible.

Map



Artwork List

Charlotte Posenenske, *Series DW Square Tubes* (1967), Cardboard, nylon screws, dimensions variable
Courtesy of Estate of Charlotte Posenenske and Galerie Mehdi Chouakri

Katie West, *Warna* (2018), Calico dyed with eucalyptus and puff ball, 1m x 1m

Katie West, *Pieces* (2018), Calico dyed with eucalyptus and puff ball, dimensions variable

Katie West, *Hold* (2018), Calico dyed with eucalyptus and puff ball, timber, 1m x 70cm

Malin Arnell, *Sometimes, Sometimes, Sometimes* (2013), Denim jacket and MP3 Player, 18:19 min
Produced in collaboration with Johanna Rosenqvist/KOEFF. Reader: Jess Arndt

Miyeon Lee, *Calanda_gpm* (2019), Acrylic paint on canvas, 600 mm x 460 mm x 25mm

Miyeon Lee, *Pink Fear* (2019), Charcoal, acrylic paint on paper, 420 mm x 297 mm

Miyeon Lee, *Untitled* (2016), Acrylic paint on paper, 297 mm x 210 mm