

An Interview with Chloë Bass

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Chloë Bass is a conceptual artist and public practitioner based in New York “working in performance, situation, publication, and installation. Her work addresses scales of intimacy, where patterns hold and break as group sizes expand, and daily life as a site of deep research.”

Along with her artistic projects, she is an Assistant Professor of Art at Queens College, and writes for publications like *Hyperallergic*. Her work has been shown across the country including places like the CUE Art Foundation and The Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art. Bass is currently working on *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, which investigates one-on-one interactions in eight chapters.

In the first chapter, Cleveland residents spent time with Bass, participating in an activity that they would do with a regular partner (dog walks, wine drinking, cemetery visits, etc.) culminating in photo and text diptychs, a series of games, and instant photos and ephemera. In another, Bass installed plaques memorializing personal history from the everyday lives of community members in Greensboro, NC in order to make public the typically discarded events that help create place. She's currently working on Chapters 6-8.

The Interview

The Book of Everyday Instruction is something you've been working on since 2015, and it will contain eight chapters. Are the chapters linear and cumulative? Or do you treat them as stand alone sections? Why did you decide on this medium/title as host to your explorations of interaction?

One of the reasons I enjoy being an artist is that it's a field where I have the space to try on being a lot of other things. I've always been interested in books, and reading, and the places books can take us. In a way, *The Book of Everyday Instruction* started as an attempt to write a book – but to write it in the way that makes most sense to me: as a series of projects rather than simply a series of texts. When I say I'm working on a book, people understand – or at least act like they understand – what that means. It's something that takes a long time, it has a number of parts, but it all fits within a certain theme or thesis. Giving audiences a familiar format of engagement is one way to draw them into a more complicated long-term project. Previously I've used other models: therapy, banking, travel agencies. This time it's a book.

The chapters of *The Book of Everyday Instruction* are not linear, but they are cumulative. The basic structure is as follows: the odd-numbered chapters are what could more traditionally be classified as social practice projects; the even-numbered chapters are more studio-based. Each chapter has its own central inquiry question, from Chapter One's “How do we know when we're really together?” to Chapter Six's “How do we share love between individuals and institutions?” and beyond. These questions are *related* to one another, and can be seen to build over time into a more legible collection of concepts, but I don't think they necessarily need to be experienced in order. The exceptions to this are chapter one, which really frames the rest of the encounters, and chapter eight, which will be an open-ended inquiry designed to pave the way for my next project, which is an investigation at the scale of immediate family units.

In terms of display, I believe the chapters all stand alone, and I'm happy to show them alone, but they also start to tell other stories when they're shown in conjunction with one another. In January, I'll be opening the first [exhibit](#) with work from all eight chapters, and it is my plan to travel that show throughout 2018 and beyond.

You're currently working on Chapter Six of the Book, *What is shared, what is offered* at your residency with the Triangle Arts Association. Can you describe the new work? In the game you're playing with Tiona Nekkia McClodden later this month, where you both show each other images the other hasn't seen and respond to them, how do you think your ideas of interaction will change?

Tiona is my third guest for the *What is shared, what is offered* series at Independent Curators International. My first two guests were Doug [Ashford](#), and Bill [Dietz](#). Each time I've played the game, my sense of its potential has changed quite a lot. All of my guests so far are people with whom I have existing intimate relationships as artists. So in that sense, we're used to talking with each other, and to thinking together. We might have some shared vocabulary (verbal, visual, sonic, conceptual, and so on). But when we present each other with surprises, and also do this in front of an audience, the conditions are suddenly performative and heightened. This is always my goal: to closely examine forms of intimacy that already exist by presenting them in slightly different contexts, or asking people to focus in different ways. In the case of the game for *What is shared, what is offered*, I find the transition from private to public incredibly stimulating. What does it mean to enact the love between two artists, or between anyone really, for an audience? We're used to this in terms of events like weddings, where we celebrate commitment and partnership in a romantic sense. These events celebrate commitment and partnership as an interplay of ideas, catalyzed through the images we each choose. Unlike a wedding, however, the duration of the partnership is not assumed or hoped to be permanent, and of course that sense of time can change everything.

The game series is the only open-ended part of Chapter Six. I'm also at work on Chapter Seven (through my Spillways fellowship in New Orleans) and Chapter Eight (in my studio) in preparation for the solo show.

You write that your current project is the next step in the creation of performance for no audience. Can you expand on this idea and your impetus to create it?

I started out in the theater world, and did my undergraduate degree in Theater Studies at Yale. It's been a long time since I've made work for the stage, and now I rarely make work for live audiences (although both *The Book of Everyday Instruction* and another recent project, *#sky #nofilter* have had lecture-performance elements). In the gradual transition from theater to visual art (a ten-year process!), I've realized that I'm less and less interested in a bunch of people watching me, or someone I've trained, do something, and I'm more and more interested in doing things together directly. It started out as a desire to make theater that people could not only see and hear, but also smell and taste, so I briefly co-ran a [supper club](#). Then I started to perform in ways that were more private: during my Free Consultations [program](#) for *The Bureau of Self-Recognition* (2011 – 2013), the entire office and character, were a form of theater that changed for each of my participant-patients. I was not there as myself, but I was still there as something flexible and custom-responsive, rather than scripted in the sense of a play. There's something very rewarding about this. In the same way that being an artist has allowed me to try on different kinds of ideas and professional approaches as part of making work, considering performance as a shared interaction rather than a top-down gift has expanded my ideas about the potential of everyday life.

Separately, there's also the way in which being watched changes things. This happens as soon as you take out a camera in a group of people. It also happens in the difference between the rehearsal room and the opening night. I've always preferred the rehearsal room. Very special things happen there. Performance without an audience allows that special magic to expand outwards as a form of presentation rather than just something for the inner circle of artists making the work.

You've mentioned in another [interview](#) (discussion on the *Department for Local Affairs* with The Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts) that you are pretty strict about the conceptual rules of your work. What does this commitment serve for your practice?

It's a way of keeping myself in check – and also keeping myself protected and sane. The work that I do is weird and intense and deeply interpersonal, but that doesn't mean that I, as a human being, am actually 100% available to anyone at any time. Sticking with a set of conceptual rules helps me to prevent my own anxieties and neuroses from taking over an interaction or project, while also allowing me to be accessible and open in the ways that (I think) most matter as I get to the heart of the interaction's or project's central inquiry. You can't learn everything all at once about intimacy. Nor can I ever be entirely in control. The framework is just a way to narrow the scope of my learning, and the scope of myself, to arrive at knowledge that can best be shared with others. When I say "best," I mean that in terms of the production of art objects, the creation of performances or games, any associated writing, or whatever other materials are eventually shared beyond the bounds of what I experience with my "no audience": the participants in a project. All art, from painting to social practice, is about intentionality and decision-making. That's how we learn elements of craft, which is essential even for extremely creative and talented artists. I've developed a lot of craft skills for photography or writing; a commitment to a set of rules is one way of developing craft skills with people.

What fragments of ideas for eventual projects do you hold whether or not you hope to see them through?

So many. You mentioned *The Department of Local Affairs* in your question above. In fact that project was never finished. It had a few different aspirations: as a franchise, where people could download materials to open their own department in their home town or neighborhood; as a book, where materials from various iterations of the project could be collected and displayed; and as a way of operating against forces of gentrification and capitalism by highlighting what in a neighborhood should not disappear, thereby stimulating plans for grassroots protection. None of those happened during the time when I was actively engaged with the project, but I can't say they never will.

Then there are the hopes for the future, and things I haven't even touched yet. As my intimacy inquiries grow in scope, I'm looking forward to making a project at the scale of a small town, and eventually at the scale of the metropolis (I'm a New Yorker, so thinking about groups the size of 8 – 10 million people makes a certain kind of sense). I'm not sure, given the rate at which these scales are growing, that I'll ever get that far, but it's a nice way to think about ending my life work.

On a direct level, in 2018 I plan to be making a film, and a sundial.

What question have you always wanted to be asked (or topic you've wanted to discuss or tidbit you've wanted to mention) in an interview but haven't?

I'm not sure anyone knows this, but in spite of all of my heavy conceptualism, serious focus, and increased tendencies towards abstraction, it's still a secret dream of mine to star in a musical. I think this is unlikely to happen. On the other hand, optimistically there's a way in which continued artistic success opens the possibility that I can eventually do anything I want without being called crazy – as long as I do it with dedication, clarity, and rigor. I've been hard at work trying to find the professional life that most allows me to be myself. I'm getting closer and closer to that in the plane of reality, so it's time to start thinking about fantasies. I'm just putting it out there. A musical. One day. I promise I can carry a tune.

Chloë Bass is thoughtful, touching, and inquisitive. Her work has a variety of focal points and applications, yet is relatable to all humans. I'm looking forward to what lies ahead for her and everyone she brings inside of her endeavors (including that musical).