Marie de Brugerolle talks to artist Jennifer Bolande about how thresholds, filming effects, and peripheral spaces shape her practice. Bolande’s research engages the viewer in a “vision in motion,” where the precarious borders of language, and strategies for transforming systems of relations, are repeatedly questioned and reframed.

SCOPING THINGS ON THE CUTTING EDGE

JENNIFER BOLANDE AND MARIE DE BRUGEROLLE
IN CONVERSATION

MARIE DE BRUGEROLLE

We met some years ago on the occasion of the exhibition RIDEAUX/blinds (2015), at Institut d’art contemporain (IAC) in Villeurbanne, France, where I presented your video piece Pink Curtain. Part of what I found fascinating about that piece was that it questioned the liminal and is situated on the threshold that exists between spaces and layers of times.

JENNIFER BOLANDE

Thresholds may be my main subject. I love things that exist in more than one realm or move in multiple directions. Often I become interested in things in the process of changing, becoming obsolete, or disappearing.

MDB

You’ve spoken about that special moment before a curtain goes up, and your video from 2014, Pink Curtain, definitely evokes thoughts about expectation and desire.

JB

Yes, I do love the very beginnings of movies—the opening curtain, the sudden field of color, the titles, the first hints of what is to come. There’s a state of suspense and a heightened attention to detail that is lost once the narrative takes over. And curtains certainly fetishize that moment or space of expectation in a big way. In my first show at The Kitchen in 1982, I placed a theatrically lit green velvet curtain opposite a still of one taken from a Warner Brothers cartoon, called Cartoon Curtain (1982). The film Pink Curtain evokes the shallow space of a tableau. I would love to see it in a theater with an actual curtain opening before it is projected. Maybe we can do this somewhere!

MDB

There might be some confusion in understanding your work as linked to the second “Pictures Generations” and understanding it only through the lens of “rephotography.”

Above - Exit Triangle, 2010. Courtesy: the artist
Opposite - Pink Curtain (still), 2014. Courtesy: the artist
When I was at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, I was exposed to Yvonne Rainier and Simone Forti’s work, and since then I have had a background in dance, following their example, I set out to integrate dance and art.

I left art school for New York City in 1976 to see if I wanted to pursue art or dance, which I’d practiced since childhood. While I was there, I studied dance at Merce Cunningham Studios, interned at Artists Space, and went to a lot of performances—art performances, dance, avant-garde theater, experimental music, and punk shows. This was also when I saw the Pioneers exhibition at Artists Space, and I was influenced by Jack’s Goldstein work in particular.

At this point I made a sharp turn away from dance and began an inquiry into media culture, collecting and rephotographing images from books, magazines, and films. At the time, I pinned myself to my extreme cropping and thought of myself as a kind of picture editor. I assembled pictures into sets, families, and sequences, interested in syntax and the movement between images almost as much as the images themselves. The pictures often featured a shallow theatrical space in which objects and backgrounds shifted roles from one image to the next; the “main character” in one became the background in the next. By reframing or displacing “the main event,” I found ways of shifting the narrative and revealing latent meanings. Eventually these sequences of pictures grew so long that it seemed as though I’d better start making films or do something else. Around 1984 I began to use different strategies to bring pictures back into physical space to elicit an embodied understanding or response.

The move into three dimensions enabled me to bring back elements of dance that I still cared about—theatricality, gesture, kinesemics, orientation in space. I also realized that photographs could be used not only as pictures but as sculptural material. I was interested in the choreography of viewing, and how we encounter and understand things. The gallery for me then became a kind of theater for sculptures that doubled as sets and as vaguely anthropomorphic characters.

A recent piece from 1987, Milk Crown, refers to a photograph by Harold Edgerton, Milk Drop Coronet, that was taken with a strobe in 1957. That photograph had links to the cinematic research conducted by people like Edward Kienholz, and, jumping forward, we can relate it to John Baldessari’s attempts to catch specific moments in some of his work. Both of those connections beg the question: is this making an image or taking an image? I think that you make images and give shape to images in what could be described as a sculptural, mise-en-scène, postcinema process. You’re setting a glance, literally giving a form to this process.

There is a kind of framing of gestures and movement in my work, which may have something to do with my roots in dance. My works are like frozen movies.

As in Edgerton’s photographs, time is frozen or held open. The “hold-open space,” is a stake-out zone, where time is paused or extended. Although most of my works are static, there is always an event happening in proximity—something either just happened or is about to happen. That event could happen physically, perceptually, connotatively, or imaginatively. Milk Crown conjures an event and photography without showing either. There’s an awareness that this form exists, even though most of us have never seen it and could never see it without strobe photography. Something happens between the mental image and the physical object that has relevance in space and in time. We understand the photograph as one moment in a progression, but the sculpture remains solidly in the present.

About the recent “stack” sculptures: are they in plaster? Their white color and smooth texture, along with their uncommon height, give them a kind of ghost/human quality.

There have been so many works of mine with stacks: stacks of film frames, speaker cabinets, appliances, shims, and movie marquees, just to name a few. I am interested in the simple gesture of stacking and also in things that accumulate. I also really love lists.

The recent stack sculptures, called New Columns, (2016–18) were made from 3D scans of stacks of the New York Times, which were then made in different materials. They are kind of ghostly. Like ghosts, stacks of newspapers are the type of thing that you might overlook, lurking in the corner of a room. Their white surface likens them to architectural columns, plinths for classical sculpture, or perhaps tombstones. With these and other recent works, I’ve been investigating the newspaper physically, allegorically, and literally as a vertical accretion of history—as a physical form on the verge of extinction.

I want to articulate the travel between and through images, revealing the microlayers of meaning that exist between us and what we see and experience. As we’ve discussed, much of my work hovers between things, between media, but it also draws attention to what else is there—invisible things like expectations, memories, cultural codes, preconceptions, and projections. What’s actually there? What is there in the margins that colors our understanding? It’s not always clear what the main event is.

I think that the job of artists, really, to study and articulate the embedded meanings carried by forms and materials we use to navigate the behaviors, narratives, models, technologies, and structures that condition human consciousness. I think art is ultimately a kind of medicine to produce cultural alchemy.
In a sense, the recent films are variants of Structuralist film, and it seems that the ideas of analogy and decoy are two main aspects of your work. I’m thinking specifically about the pieces Plywood Curtains, from 2008, and Exit Triangle, from 2010. A decoy traps the viewer in an experience of fakery at the same time that it makes the viewer conscious of this lie; for me, those two artworks left me thinking about trickery, traps, and the suspension of disbelief.

As Cézanne said, the world is made of cubes, spheres, and cones. Cones are an analogue for vision, for focus or projection, and in the two works mentioned above, they have a bodily aspect as well. In other works, I’ve used them in relation to perspective, or as amplifiers of meaning or sound. There are a lot of geometric solids in my work! As Cézanne said, the world is made of cubes, spheres, and cones.


Visible Distance / Second Sight, 2017, was meant to be experienced from the window of a moving car, and it operated as both a landscape and an experience and ultimately ceased to be a still image. The piece consisted of six billboards in the Coachella Valley with photographic reproductions of the mountains that stand behind them; when the horizon line matches the re-
tains that stand behind them; when the horizon line matches the re-
production perfectly, the billboard disappears.

It’s something like a low-tech special effect: what you first thought was flat and solid changed into something dimensional and mobile, possibly signaling an opening rather than a closing.

In watching your film of 2015, Set { } Piece, I found myself wondering if you regard pieces such as this as Structuralist films. Set { } Piece explores the phenomenon of recognition that’s simultaneously contradicted as we watch women reading on different floors of a building. How did you create this piece?

The cone shape comes back oft: Speaker II (1986), Times Square Cone (1989)... We spoke about it when we met in January.

Analogy and decoy, absolutely! I don’t know about trickery, but I do like surprises and double takes. It’s maybe the opposite of expectation, presenting something you did not expect to see at the periphery of attention. The project Plywood Curtains also reg-
tested a particular moment in time—it was made in response to the economic downturn of 2008, when the numerous closed and vacated buildings and storefronts had visibly changed the face of Los Angeles. I photographed sheets of plywood and printed them to scale on fabric and installed the curtains in multiple storefront windows across the city. At a glance, while driving by, plywood in a window registers as a sign of construction or destruction, perhaps something to avoid looking at. The curtains invited a double take. It’s something like a low-tech special effect: what you first thought was flat and solid changed into something dimensional and mobile, possibly signaling an opening rather than a closing.

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simple and transparent, yet the experience is more than the sum of its parts. I love work that draws attention to the process of perceiving or reading, as much as whatever the "content" might be. See [1] Piece began when I noticed this odd building with curtains in a sequence of similar but subtly different windows. The windows were evocative of both stage sets and film frames, and I imagined placing characters into them. I positioned four women with similar hairstyles—parted in the middle, like curtains—in each of the window frames and had them holding books and occasionally turning pages. The piece consists of a number of vertical pans that begin at street level, then move up the facade of the building into the night sky. The gesture of page turning is both a marker of time and a rhythmic element that punctuates the continuously panning camera. The takes are similar yet subtly different, so it’s at once episodic, sequential, and cyclical. I showed See [1] Piece to James Benning, and he said it reminded him of Hollis Frampton’s Zeno’s Lemma (1971), which is a film that I love, so that was a great compliment. Like James Benning, Bill Leavitt has studied mathematics extensively, and a few years ago he asked me if I thought about set theory in mathematics; he saw a kind of mathematical quality in the way I was reconceiving sets of elements with overlapping members and creating correspondences between one set and another. I have a hazy and not altogether pleasant memory of being taught set theory in grade school, and I’ve always thought more in terms of grammar, syntax, and semantics. But Bill’s question made me realize how much of my work is, in fact, engaged with math and geometry.

MDB

In recent years, film has become an increasingly prominent part of your work. Can you talk a bit about how you’ve moved from objects to film?

JB

I have used one-shot films and loops in installations over the years, but See [1] Piece was the first film I edited. I think that many of my ideas are filmic, but early on, I couldn’t imagine managing the costs, collaboration, and planning involved in filmmaking, so I channeled my ideas into other forms. The process has become much more accessible, so recently, I’ve been able to proceed in a more direct way. Movies have always been an inspiration, although I’m often interested in aspects of them that might be considered tangential—the procession of advertisements announcing their arrival, the movie marquees, the light from the projector, the opening frames, the scale of the image, the light from the projector, the opening frames, the dissolve, the zoom, the cascading names at the end.

MDB

The more recent work The Composition of Decomposition (2018) was a very precise process. You started with an image from a newspaper, found more than ten years ago that you kept in the back of your mind. Can you speak a bit about the genesis of the piece?

JB

It took me a really long time to determine the right setting for this image. It’s an image I clipped from the New York Times of a group of skeletons in a burial site from the plaque years. The photograph was taken from above the grave, and the skeletons are looking up...