

BOMB

I Want Us To Look More Closely: Chloë Bass Interviewed by Jessica Lynne

Asking the question, "Why are we like this?"

By Jessica Lynne

June 8, 2018



Chloë Bass, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*. Installation view. The Knockdown Center. Photograph by Kalaija Mallery.

On a recent visit to the Museum of Modern Art, I jokingly told Chloë Bass that as I think about the scope of her conceptual art practice, I like to imagine that she is really asking us to answer the question, "Why are we like this?" It is a question, often asked rhetorically or in jest, meant to point toward the absurdity of a thing, or system, or relationship. However, as she examines frameworks of intimacy, inviting us to (re)examine the porous parameters of what it means to be together, it is evident that when Bass asks, "Why are we like this?" the interrogation is heavy, full, and pressing.

That Bass has taken up this task with gravitas is quite clear as I consider her current solo exhibition, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, currently on view at the Knockdown Center. The show brings together Bass's eight-chapter investigation, conducted over the course of three years, of one-on-one social interactions that scale outward from the self to the institution. The show marks the first time all eight projects have been shown together. I spoke with Bass about a vocabulary for conceptualism, humor, and navigating revision.



Chloë Bass, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*. Installation view. The Knockdown Center. Photograph by Kalaija Mallery.

Jessica Lynne

What does it mean to inherit a vocabulary of conceptualism and extend it? How has your own lexicon around conceptualism evolved, specifically as we think about *The Book of Everyday Instruction* as both performance and research?

Chloë Bass

I grew up surrounded by art, and artwork, and intellectual thinking, but I didn't go to art school. I went to theater school. I went to intellectual theater school. I don't have a BFA. I have a BA. It's in theater studies. It's not in theater practice. Then I went to graduate school for performance and interactive media, and so I did learn a lot about performance, and performance studies, and performance theory at that time, and some of that was a carryover from my undergraduate education, because I was working with a wonderful professor, Mark Robinson at Yale, who really teaches the history of the theatrical avant-garde.

But the theatrical avant-garde and performance art world, as he knows and makes very explicit, had so much overlap that I didn't think about them as different things. And so I had all this exposure to stuff that it turned out later was art, was performance merging into visual art, but I thought about as theater.

I don't have a studio-art education past the tenth grade, so I'm both very professional and literate and smart, and also tremendously ignorant and kind of a freak. I could not define conceptualism for you. I can't do it, but what I was told is visual artwork is in the service of what we see and what is used to make what we see, and conceptual artwork is in primary service of the idea.

The line for me between, then, conceptual work and performance is that, in performance, the idea is people, and that's all that it is. I am doing this kind of consistent conceptualism, but the idea is always people, and the idea within people is always context.

JL

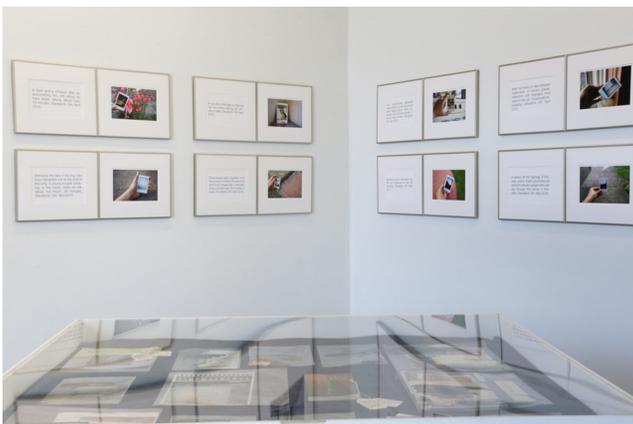
Can we come back to the question, "Why are we like this?" Which may be a more ridiculous way of articulating part of what you just said, but there's also something about the humor in that question that feels really important, that it's not simply a rhetorical device. I don't know that you and I have ever talked about this before, but I find you to be quite humorous. I also don't know if that is blasphemous to say given that you take up the study of intimacy, which can be quite daunting and exhaustive.

CB

You can tell people that I'm funny. It's okay.

JL

I really believe that.



Chloë Bass, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*. Installation view. The Knockdown Center. Photograph by Kalajia Mallery.

CB

Humor never enters into any of the things that people think about me—and I think that’s good—but the basis of this work is a true inquiry of, “I don’t understand how it is that we came to live with others in the way that we do. I don’t get it.” Admitting that I don’t know things is one of my favorite things to do right now. I love it, but I think people sometimes find it disingenuous, because the way that they respond to me is to console me and assure me that I do know the answer, rather than to really grapple with the question. And I think when you return to a really basic semi-rhetorical question like, “Why are we like this?” people can start to understand that I mean it. I feel ready. I feel invited. I feel able to start to contribute to that, to start to understand that I might be an expert on that.

JL

Are you ever worried that this will exhaust you? Even if the project is a lifelong inquiry, what happens when the mind just needs a break from the question itself? Are you worried about what that may look like for you?

CB

All the time. I think the biggest telltale sign of how this is not working for me is that what people don’t know, and what I only personally understood myself, is that in 2011 in October, when I started the *Bureau of Self-Recognition*, I did that from a period of such intense depression, intense, intense, intense depression, that the primary motivator for me in starting that project was to get myself to do something every day, something besides breathe.

I’m not saying that all of these projects come from my own struggles with mental illness and all of that. They don’t. But *Bureau* started from that point, and I used that project to heal myself in a lot of ways. Then I thought that I would use the next phase of the project to heal myself and my ideas of damage around partnership. In moving to one-on-one relationships, a different thing happened, which is not to say it created more damage, but I created more criticality and more questioning of my ideas around partnership, and have over the course of completing *The Book of Everyday Instruction*.



Chloë Bass, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*.
Installation view. The Knockdown Center. Photograph
by Kalajia Mallery.

JL

How do you correct or undo or redo a thing, if after it's already been shared with the public, you feel that maybe it could have been shared differently?

CB

For the most part I also make this really easy, because, for example, with a project like "You and Me Together," which is the first chapter of *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, no one saw what happened except me and the people that I was with. No one knows. I could be completely lying. I'm telling you that I'm not, but I'm telling you that I'm not. I could be lying again. I did have very specific contracts and letters and follow-up with all of the people in the project. I don't make that stuff publicly available. I would under the right circumstance, but I think that has to be fifty years from now.

In those moments where you really think of the primary form of the work being something that was never publicly experienced, there becomes this permission to reintroduce. Even the exhibit that I made out of those primary forms of work were translations and were insufficient, and that leaves an opportunity to reinvent or recreate other things from that primary form of experience material, which I can never change, because it's between me and someone else. I can only change it by remembering it differently over time, which is unavoidable. So, I want to leave a loophole for that, but there are also ways in which I made concrete documentation to some extent of those experiences. I wouldn't say traditional documentation, but it is concrete.

JL

Trust is connected to everything that intimacy contains, and there's a great kind of intrigue in thinking about the way that we as viewers or people who experience your work are also then directly implicated in that process or connection.

CB

That's the work of living, and I feel implicated, and I feel challenged, and I feel responsible, and I feel a sense of labor and a sense of obligation. We have so many negative connotations around all of those words. I want to present them as real, but value-neutral in life. Joseph Beuys was such an asshole, but then also you're like, "The world is an artwork that we make together." Fuck you, Joseph Beuys. You're right. You're right. You're right.

Chloë Bass: *The Book of Everyday Instruction is on view at the Knockdown Center in Queens, New York, until June 17.*

Jessica Lynne is co-founder/editor of ARTS.BLACK, a journal of art criticism from Black perspectives. She lives and works in Brooklyn.