

TEMPORARY

The Book of Everyday Instruction: A Conversation with Chloë Bass

By Jillian Steinhauer

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I don't remember when I first saw part of Chloë Bass's *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, but I do remember how it made me feel: uncomfortable. Not squeamish or put off, just somehow nervous—like I'd been thrust into an intimate encounter I wasn't ready for. I didn't realize right away that that's how the work is meant to operate: It draws you in by creating a feeling of closeness, even as it holds you at arm's length by only giving you bits and pieces of information.

The Book of Everyday Instruction is comprised of eight chapters, or projects, made between January 2015 and January 2018. For each one, Bass considered one-on-one relationships in a different way. For example, for *Chapter One: you+me together*, she spent afternoons doing ordinary activities with 16 strangers in Cleveland. For *Chapter Four: It's amazing we don't have more fights*, she drew on proxemics—the study of how humans use space—to create objects like ribbons that measure typical distances between people and a text-based installation for unisex bathrooms. (One in-stall sign suggests questions you can ask your neighbor, such as “Do you feel comfortable right now?”) *Chapter Seven: Subject to change without notice* consists of an app called City Palette that highlights the subjective experience of observing color. The entire *Book* is the second phase of a larger project that Bass is undertaking to research forms of intimacy.

It's also currently on view at the Knockdown Center, where, in two white-walled galleries, lines of poetic text adorn customized hoodies, Pantone color samples, and spice jars; where empty frames with descriptive captions hang near photos showing citizens of Greensboro, North Carolina, posing with aluminum plaques that memorialize aspects of their lives. More than having an aesthetic, Bass's exhibition creates a feeling—a sense that this is a space where attention has been paid and care both taken and given. What might be the show's thesis statement is lettered onto the old-fashioned Knockdown Center sign hanging outside: “I want us to look more closely.”



Chloë Bass, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, on view at Knockdown Center April 21 – June 17, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and Knockdown Center. Photograph by Kalajia Mallery.

I first met Bass several years ago, while I was an editor at Hyperallergic, to which she contributes. We became friends and have since had many conversations about art, life, and work. In this somewhat more formal one, we spoke about her lack of training as an artist, why she's interested in intimacy and hates empathy, what it means to be political, and more.

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Jillian Steinhauer: *Let's start with the idea of a book. I want to know where the idea came from to structure a group of art projects this way.*

Chloë Bass: So, I joke about this all the time, but my joke is actually one of those jokes that's true. I work really slowly, and there's this weird misperception that I work fast. So I thought, when I was conceiving of this project: What if I say I'm doing a book, when people were like, "what are you doing next"? If I'd say, "I'm working on a book," people would just leave me alone, because we have this framework where a book takes a really long time to produce. That wasn't the entire reason I did it, but it was a huge part of it, because that cult of "what's next" is really damaging to me. It doesn't work well with my ego or sense of security. It doesn't work well for my work.

But also—and this is kind of more true—the book as a conceptual framework is a series of things around a single thesis that builds towards a conclusion. So I can do these eight projects that are not eight of the same projects. They don't have eight of the same format. They don't have eight of the same ways of bringing meaning. But they all are leading towards the same thesis, which is really, "What is it to be together in the world, specifically through the lens of one-on-one relationships?"

JS: *Why one-on-one relationships?*

CB: It's partially because of the larger framework that I have for my entire practice, which is that I'm going to be scaling up these investigations of intimacy gradually. I started with the self, so the logical next step was the pair. Also, I think because the pair is a really fundamental relationship through which we understand all other relationships. I think it's through pairs that we really come to understand ourselves. And in doing the *Bureau of Self-Recognition* [her previous project], the unspoken person in every pair was me. This becomes a more explicit exploration of pairing, which can also then be more expansive. Because I can say it is about how it starts with you and me together, but it can also expand to more abstract ideas of pairing, like the relationship between a person and safety as being an ongoing collaboration with yourself and your city or institutions.

Now I'm going to be working with immediate families. After that I think the next logical step will be when I teach in a classroom—a studio class is usually between 10 and sometimes 18 people. And then kind of keep on going.

JS: *It's so interesting to think about a pair and map it onto the idea of safety or the relationship with an institution. What do we gain from doing that? Is there a way that we can learn something about institutions by thinking about them in such intimate terms?*

CB: Well, initially, a long time ago, when I was still in grad school, I gave a talk about Twitter. I was so angry because I didn't like that the Museum of Modern Art was performing this corporate personhood. I think Twitter has changed since that happened; the ways that institutions use Twitter versus individuals has found a vocabulary that is different. But at the time—this is like 2010, 2011—it really seemed like that was a dovetailing of vocabularies, and I was so upset about it. Later, returning to that idea of corporate personhood or the institution as an individual, and what we think that we can get from that framework, seems very rich and valuable to me, even when it's a sort of false parameter.

One of the things that I do as part of the *Book of Everyday Instruction* is couples counseling for individuals and institutions. Because I think that, whether you're an arts administrator, a commissioned artist, a funder, a whatever, the individual has this very beleaguered marriage within the institution. It seems nice to bring those things into a framework where you could say to your partner, the institution, "I really feel like you didn't see me in this moment." Or, "How come every time I do this, you do that?" Which is a very couples-counseling way of dissecting a problem. It makes people feel better, and I think it makes people see themselves a little better, because they start to understand that they are perhaps not 50% of the problem, but some percent of the problem.



Chloë Bass, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, on view at Knockdown Center April 21 – June 17, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and Knockdown Center. Photograph by Kalaija Mallery.

JS: *Right, but in a normal partnership, if you said that to the other person, they would respond. It's different when you're dealing with an entity that doesn't have one voice in which to respond.*

CB: But so much of this conversation—so much of any conversation with any other—is in the realm of the imagination, right?

JS: *That's true.*

CB: This is why my whole anti-empathy thing is just relentless. Because when we imagine the feelings of others, there's a high likelihood that we're imagining them wrong. That's fascinating, that's a cool thing about imagination, but it's a bad thing if you're going to say that empathy is feeling what someone else is feeling.

JS: *So does empathy have to involve some kind of active imagination?*

CB: I think so.

JS: *Because that's what this argument hinges on, right? That you're just getting it wrong, and that's not helping anyone.*

CB: Or you're getting it right, but then you take on a bad feeling and instead of doing something with it, you're exhausted by it. Those are two kind of mismatched outcomes. And so, given that almost everything is the product of some imagined response, it doesn't seem that off to me to say, okay, the institution maybe isn't present as a single voice, but you're *imagining* the other half of the conversation and you're putting yourself in that position. We imagine stuff all the time—people could never write a novel or a play if they couldn't imagine two sides of a conversation in the same moment.

JS: *Totally. This is something I do all the time, when I need to have a conversation that involves an element of confrontation: I imagine the response. I get into this narrative in my head where I basically have the conversation before I've even had the conversation, and then I get upset about the outcome of the imaginary conversation in my head, which is crazy.*

CB: I think we all do that. So what this is sort of asking people to do is really imagine it beyond themselves. Because then you get stuck in your own feedback, and that's what makes you upset. What I'm trying to do is produce a framework where you can sort of separate, even though it's all within you. You're separating yourself and your own emotional reactions from this imagined conversation and then seeing where your emotions come into play.

To do a lot of these projects I had to become other, more palatable, less emotional versions of myself, in order to be a safe and interesting and not-too-challenging person for others to interact with. I'm really weird and sensitive and fairly emotional, and I have an off-putting brain sometimes. I think these things are fine about me, but they're not fine when I really need to do projects that are about you. I'm not going to really change ever, but there are moments where I can withdraw in a way that's positive to leave space for somebody else.



Chloë Bass, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*. Image courtesy of the artist.

JS: *You're really good at that. I mean, to gain the kind of trust you have with strangers in these projects, it's necessary. It seems like it would be a balance of being enough of yourself so that it's authentic, but also, you're trying not to take up emotional space, because you want them to have the experience. That's tricky. I guess that's where the performing comes in.*

CB: Yeah. But there's no audience, right?

JS: *Right. So why do you not want to have an audience?*

CB: Well, I think audiencing fundamentally changes stuff. I think audiencing is a beautiful thing. I come from the theater and I love being in an audience and I love crowd behavior. But doing something that you know you're being watched doing makes you do it differently. Your consideration is towards the outside rather than towards the inside.

JS: *They're performances for no audience, but then you translate everything into static work that is for an audience. How do think about that process?*

CB: Well, this is where really distilling something to its most essential parts becomes important, because what I want to convey to the audience is those most essential parts. I think of all the works that are on view as basically like souvenirs. They're souvenirs of an experience, but that's for me.

They're souvenirs for you that are kind of emotional cues that you might be reminded of in the future, when you are having a type of feeling that was also elicited by some of the feelings that you had in this work. So they're souvenirs for the future, not souvenirs of the past. You didn't have the past, but I imagine that you and anybody, hopefully, might be able to feel something later and say, "When did I feel this before? I felt it when I was dealing with this artwork," which was kind of distilled out of these component feelings that were shared between me and all these other people that you will never meet and don't have to.

JS: *Can you unpack Chapter Eight a little bit? That's the newest one.*

CB: I wanted to return to the idea of how the individual is contextualized within the pair, and so that chapter is a framework of the four different audiences that I both served as in the creation of this work, but also served to—so students, artists, writers, and curators. I picked four people who could be those, and I have sentences that kind of describe a structure with each. And each of those sentences is meant to operate both ways. I don't know what it's called in math, but there's that arrow where you are demonstrating a kind of equivalence. So that sentence, "I will be you when I have what you have," which is the one for the curator, is meant to be in the middle of that relationship from artist to curator and curator back to artist. "In the end, I invented you one by one"—writer to artist, artist back to writer.



Chloë Bass, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, on view at Knockdown Center April 21 – June 17, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and Knockdown Center. Photograph by Kalajia Mallery.

JS: *That's a good transition to talk about language, because it's such a big part of your work. What role do you see language playing?*

CB: The role of language within the work I think is just another one of those formats of translation for those things that we didn't really share, that I didn't make for you, that I made with other people for them. But I can translate them through photograph. I can translate them through collage. I can translate them through all these different formats of display. Language is another way of doing that. I think I just also really like words and what words do. I don't know that my next project is going to be as language oriented. I feel already kind of sad about that, but also, it's a very important challenge for me to face. I have this insecurity around the production of artworks because I haven't taken studio art since 10th grade.

JS: *It's amazing that you took studio art in 10th grade.*

CB: I went to a really great high school, and in 10th grade—God bless you, Hunter College High School—we had to go to the Metropolitan Museum, and we had to take our colored pencils and pastels and copy a fucking painting. I hated it so much.

JS: *That does not seem like your thing.*

CB: My mom is also an artist. She's a painter and a printmaker, so I had been around art all the time, but she went to Cooper Union. They taught her fundamentals. And she doesn't necessarily exercise those fundamentals, but the fact that she knows them was important for her training. I was like, "If this is art, I'm not doing it. I'm just not." I have been exposed to a lot of other, different types of art as well, but I thought that I would have to go through all of those phases to even get to do those other, different types of art.

JS: *Like you have to learn to paint and draw to become a conceptual artist.*

CB: Yes. My most striking art moment as a kid was, Rebecca Horn had a major show at the Guggenheim. This was the early '90s. I was little, and in the oculus of the Guggenheim she had her exploding piano sculpture. I don't remember the title, but it's so incredible and it makes this huge sound. Every 15 minutes this piano would explode, and it's like, "I want to do that. That's what I want to do with my life: I want to put exploding pianos hanging from the ceilings of buildings, but not if I have to learn to draw." It's a bummer—I actually do now wish I knew how to draw.



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JS: *Was there a point at which you realized you didn't need that permission?*

CB: No, that's where the insecurity remains. Because now I teach in an art school and I say things to my students, like, "I don't know how to do two-point perspective. I know how to do one-point perspective because I learned that in 10th grade." And they're like, "Ha, ha, ha," and I'm like, "No, really." I think it's correct to learn the fundamentals of things. I'm not an anti-canon person. I think that canons need to be reevaluated, but like, I went to Yale and was in the Directed Studies program, where I read classic humanities only for a year. I took Latin in high school, so why was I so resistant to learning to draw? I took classical music three. I can breakdown a Gregorian chant into its component parts, but I didn't want to draw. It seems a little bit unnecessarily ornery, even for me.

JS: *Maybe you knew that you didn't want to be that kind of artist, so you were pushing back immediately.*

CB: Well, I didn't think that I was going to be an artist. I thought I was going to be a theater director. It seemed impossible to me.

JS: *What's the point at which it became possible—what was the moment of the switch?*

CB: This is going to sound really bad, but after a couple of years of producing Bushwick Open Studios, I saw a lot of art and was like, "If this is it, I can surely do better." Which is such a jerk thing to say, but that's what happened. I felt like this whole world of permissions was suddenly opened up by being an artist, rather than a world of restrictions, which is what I had experienced the last time I was taking an art class. I really want to be fair and say my art teacher was probably fantastic, but I just wasn't ready to be there.

JS: *For what it's worth, I have felt similarly about being a writer. I have had moments where I'm like, "Oh, if this is what most people are producing, I can do this." It's shitty, but I do it too.*

CB: It's just terrible, but it's true. Also, I think I was like, "Wow, people spend a ton of money on this." Like, between the studio rental and the supplies you're using—and the reckless ways in which you use supplies, because you don't really know what you're doing—the best thing I could do for myself is start cheap. So that if it turns out I am really bad at this, at least it was just something that I tried, that was an experiment, and not something that I'm, like, staking my life security on. Which is why I got so invested in cheap materials.

I think that also my investment in cheap materials is because I do see these shows as a way of teaching us how to live better together, which is a form of labor. I think that when we couch some of our human relationships as work—when we admit that they are work—we do better in them than when we expect them to be somehow not work.



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JS: *This makes me think of Adrian Piper and the idea that you have to put in effort; you have to meet her halfway. You're asking for participation—for people to not just take selfies but invest themselves and do a bit of work.*

CB: She's so tricky because she's always asking you to meet her halfway, but when you go halfway, you notice she's not there. She is the ultimate loner.

JS: *You ask people to meet you halfway, but you're there.*

CB: I'm there. I think her work rests on forms of intimacy, but on very specific forms of intimacy, and I want to rest on maybe a broader spectrum of intimacy. Her work gives me permission to exist in this more soft, poetic form because I don't have to bludgeon people—because she already bludgeoned them.

Maybe I'll never meet her, but if I ever meet her it's just like, thank you, because I would have had to do so much that I don't know that I'm strong enough to do. But now I can do this other thing that I am precise and kind of interstitial enough to do because you did this thing.

JS: *Are there artists who are working more in that poetic space that you admire?*

CB: I'm always really inspired by the work of Andrea Fraser. I care about her and I value her poetry so much. Her ear for language is just uncannily amazing. Also her ability to translate things into galleries that you feel like aren't quite gallery works. Yeah, I mean, Stanley Broun. Stanley Broun is just incredible. He did these really delicate text pieces that are indexed in very beautiful and precise and highly crafted but super simple ways. His work is exceptional.



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JS: *A lot of text art is—even if it’s poetic, it’s blunt. Very in your face. You treat language so differently in your work, in a way that I think is more rare.*

CB: This funny thing happened when people finally started to be aware of what those texts [in her artworks] said. They were asking the curators, “Who wrote those words?” Because they were like, “The words are so poetic. This must be the artist using some other person’s text.” And I was like, “No, no, no, no, no, I wrote them all.” It was fascinating to me because it was like, we can’t accept that one person could do both of these things.

JS: *Yes, which reminds me of Piper again, in terms of being good at different things and how hard that is for people to assimilate.*

CB: Totally, and I get it. I come from a fundamentally hybrid place, so it’s not that shocking to me that that’s the kind of work I would make. Both my parents are these really interesting hybrid people. My mom is a painter and a printmaker, but also a poet and a writer. My father is a philosopher, but he’s also like a practicing psychoanalyst.

But coming back to this question of poetry—I don’t read a ton of poetry, but the poetry that I read is the poetry that doesn’t seem like poetry. So, like Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* is a book of poetry I guess—or it’s just a book. Maggie Nelson, is that poetry? I don’t know, maybe. But those types of text open up a world of permission.

JS: *Yes, because they’re very hybrid. They invent their own categories, in a way.*

Okay, so I was reading back over some of the stuff you wrote at Hyperallergic. There’s a quote that seems like a kind of manifesto for your work: “This is how the world changes: not petition by petition, but hand to hand to hand to hand. When I make art, it’s not a bomb or a distraction. It’s an invitation to come closer.” That made me think about your relationship to activism. The small scale is important to you, and you’re trying to effect change through one-on-one interaction, not through protest or reaching the most people possible. But you do also go to protests.

CB: I like protests, but it’s not my art practice; it’s just my life practice.

JS: *Right, that’s the thing—your art is separate from your activism, but then this quote positions the work as a kind of activism in its own way. So I want to hear more about where this idea comes from.*

CB: In my own life, the times when I'm actually aware that I have changed is because of a person. And the places where I'm most aware that I can't change is because of a person. What that means for me is that it just allows us to be together on earth. Because I do believe that systemic change is absolutely required, and I've kind of situated my work as small "p" politics, and then protest is like big "P" politics. Anything that happens interpersonally is a form of a politic.

It is political—it's deeply political, but it's not related to a specific issue. Initially, I put these words in the bathroom because the bathroom is a place where people read. It was right when HB2, the bathroom bill, in North Carolina had passed, and I had just been in North Carolina, which everyone knew, and they were like, "Is this your bathroom bill piece?" I'm like, "Only kind of." It's everyone's bathroom piece, but sure, if you want to relate it to that, I'm not opposed. But that's not why I made it, and the content doesn't quite reflect that. It troubles this idea of how we share intimate spaces regardless of gender.



Chloë Bass, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*. Image courtesy of the artist.

JS: So you do think of your work as political even though it's not addressing these explicit, capital "P" political topics?

CB: Oh, I do. And I'm a very political person, because for me, politics is how we make the world by living together. It is also legislative, but the way that legislation is enacted, for the most part on a daily basis, comes down to people. And if we can change the way that happens, in a way it matters less if we change the law. Because we're choosing to uphold the laws in the ways that make the most sense for us in our communities.

People have asked me, actually—and this is also based on my background as a community organizer, which I'm not anymore—if I myself wanted to go into politics, because of my ability and desire to deal with and interpret people at both a smaller and larger scale simultaneously. And the answer is, I really don't, because it seems like, when you go into politics, you have to let go of everything that you hold dear so that you can fix things from the place that they're at. I really admire people who can take that on, but I'm an artist. I want to take it on from the place where I hold it dear and just kind of leave it at that.

JS: Part of the beauty of art is that it can envision things beyond what already exists. It gives us this place of imagination where we can think beyond what we already have to what we could have and might want—which I think politics often squashes.

CB: Completely, and that's the provocation with Adrian Piper, right? What if we took all of these things that she presents as true—how would we be? Where would we be? Who would we be? For me, then, the next phase of that is: What if we took all of these things that happened to us on the most minute level as true? What if we noticed them and valued them as true—how would we be? Who would we be? Where would we be?