

CHLOË BASS: The Tone, Texture & Taste of Intimacy

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Chloë Bass: *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, Knockdown Center, 2018.
Photo: Kalajja Mallery.

Chloë Bass is a highly inventive conceptual artist who utilizes every tool at her disposal to unearth the beauty held within the minutiae of the everyday. In this profoundly probing and playful exhibition—which includes photography, text, video, sculpture, performance, a mobile phone app, documentation, and site-specific intervention—visitors engage the philosophical prompts behind her projects investigating self and other, including: “*How do we know when we’re really together?*” “*What is the story told by the distance between two bodies in space?*” “*How do we share love between individuals and institutions?*” In solving these abstract equations of human existence, Bass develops concrete methodologies that visualize the performances embedded in our daily lives, framing our patterned anxieties, behaviors, and spatial relations as art forms in and of themselves.

In *The Book of Everyday Instruction*—which presents a body of work developed between 2015 and 2018, split into eight chapters—Bass radicalizes the language through which we experience, navigate, and discuss intimacy. She surrenders the role of author in this evolving narrative, and instead approaches each chapter with an eagerness to let the story write itself. Bass imagines a series of interpersonal interactions wherein she shares creative license with her collaborators, an eclectic group of strangers she finds on the internet, through research, and within her diverse creative communities of practice. The Knockdown Center becomes the institutional stage upon which these personal interactions unfold, and rearticulated roles converge.

For Chapter One, Bass posted an ad to the Cleveland Craigslist inviting respondents to do “a thing they would normally do with someone else” with her. This “performance without an audience,” led Bass to teach a prison art class, replace a tour guide’s children on a practice tour, stand in for a teenage clique sick of hearing their friend ramble on about a crush, and go on someone else’s date.¹ To visualize these potent social interactions—each of which strikes a delicate balance between trust and vulnerability, patience and impulse—Bass distilled the experience into a set of aesthetically minimal yet striking diptychs. *you + me together* (2015) pairs Polaroids with texts that describe the exact moment when something happened between the artist and the stranger that resembled intimacy. Here, Bass hones her unique intuition and ability to remain present as a craft, exposing the idiosyncratic skills we carry into social interactions, and celebrating the unparalleled self-discovery that comes from our readings of those around us.

Chapter Two—like the other even chapters in the exhibition—serves as a homecoming: a return to the self, where ideas tested out in the world are further unpacked and augmented through in-depth, local research. After returning to New York from Cleveland, Bass recalls, “I became really obsessed with the idea of the pair relationship inherent to voyeurism. What does it mean to be a pair if only the voyeur knows that the pairing exists?”² We joked about URL versus IRL stalking, and how surveillance in any form can create a false sense of proximity to and intimacy with another. In *Things I’ve seen people do lately* (2015), Bass develops protocols of attention that help her to actively observe social interactions in her immediate surroundings and retain the most important details. In one piece she transcribes a record of these interactions from memory a full day after they transpired, and in another, she invites visitors to play with sixty-one transparencies of screenshots she pulled from publicly-accessible network surveillance feeds she watched daily for two months. As a newcomer to Bass’s work, I was immediately struck by the rigor, trust, and self-discipline the artist brings to her processes of social observation.

In Chapter Four, Bass moves beyond her own protocols to experiment with the established sociological pedagogy for proxemics, or the study of how humans use, and communicate non-verbally within, space. Using blank tape measures that she bought in bulk from a gag gift supplier, Bass developed a workshop that invited people to build narratives inspired by the proxemics framework: 18” of intimate space, 4’ of personal space, 12’ of social space and 25’ of public space. Personal stories transcribed onto the blank tape were then revealed and concealed as participants drifted toward or away from Bass who stood still at the other end of the tape measure. The bashful blushing and maniacal laughter this piece produces as participants land face to face with the artist speak to another premise put forth by Bass—that the spectrum between private and public, personal and communal, is not only delineated in our social behaviors and by our shared spaces, but is held within our bodies as emotions and impulses too.



Chloë Bass: *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, Knockdown Center, 2018.
Photo: Kalaija Mallery.

In Chapters Six and Seven, Bass steers her prompts—and her penchant for play—toward abstraction. *The Four Phases of Love* (2017), four square digital prints, depict diagrams of mounds of spices configured on a plate to symbolically map the love story between an individual and a cultural or social institution. Bass asserts, “Smell and taste are important evocations of experience that humans rely on. I wanted to have some small element suggestive of those things as subtle ways of triggering or indicating memory.” The prints are accompanied by the spices themselves, presented in jars on a neighboring shelf. Visitors are encouraged to open them and take in the scents, triggering their own associations and memories that help to locate themselves within the work. In *City Palette* (2017), Bass collaborated with 20-year-old Taylor Snead to create a mobile phone app that explores gentrification and what the artist discusses as “chromophobia.” The app invites users to take a photograph of their immediate surroundings, assign their own color codes, observe where whitewashing has transpired, and see familiar surroundings in unfamiliar ways.

Inspired by what she describes as the intentionally defunct New Orleans public transportation system—one designed to divide the city along color lines—Bass deploys the app as a tool to collapse binaries and mine the abstract intersections of perception and reality. Though technological in nature, the app actually encourages a return to mindfulness, and invites its users to actively and communally observe and translate the constantly changing world around them.

There is a sense of immediacy and care that Bass brings to her practice that can be felt from Chapter One, and gains momentum from her dynamic—yet often invisible—presence within the works. For this truly multidisciplinary artist, I would add *time* to the unending list of mediums she uses to explore her subject matter, and *patience* as a craft she has fine-tuned over the three years this project took to unfold. Her vulnerable, exhaustive, rigorous, spirited, philosophical, heartfelt, and intuitive approach is singular, and invites us to see ourselves and our environments anew. Bass's commitment to collaboration adds deep temporal and experiential layers to her works, which leave behind traces that can be seen, felt, and even touched—it is clear that Bass allows what she learns from her collaborators to grow and shift her practice in new directions. *The Book of Everyday Instruction* offers an expanded vision for human love, and is a respite from the reductive ways we conflate intimacy with privacy. Bass reminds us all that it is okay to connect wherever, however, and with whomever we damn well please, even in broad daylight.

Notes

1. From an in-person conversation with the artist, May 17, 2018.
2. Ibid.