

# TEMPORARY

## The Book of Everyday Instruction: A Conversation with Chloë Bass

By Jillian Steinhauer

June 7, 2018

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.

**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.

hlo Bass, he Book of Everyday Instruction, on view at [nockdown enter pril](#)  
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