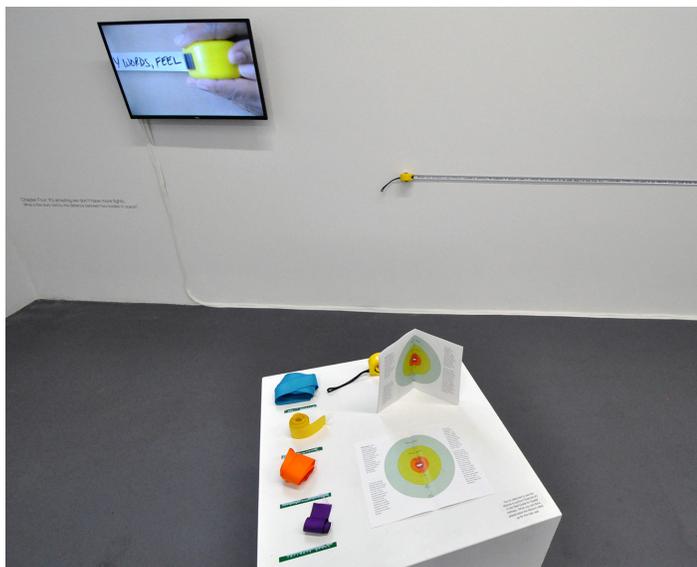


HYPERALLERGIC

The Elusive Index of Relationships Between Everyone

An exhibition divided into eight chapters, Chlöe Bass offers us the residue of social exchange for the audience to examine.

By Hrag Vartanian
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A view of Chapter Four of Chlöe Bass's *The Book of Everyday Instruction* (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

As an editor, there are few pleasures like publishing the work of writers you love, and I'm lucky to count artist Chlöe Bass among my favorite voices in art writing today. It's a privilege to publish her words on this site. And while it's her words that first revealed to me the beautiful complexity of her worlds, it's her art — by which I mean the work shown in art spaces — that often feels more central to the longterm projects she is engaged in, namely an examination of the complexity of human relationships. Her art lingers on terms like intimacy, partnership, and empathy, and dives into open-ended questions that ruminate about the essence of our humanity and humanness. If the gallery is a space to imagine possibilities, she offers an archeology of experience removed from bodies, even if everything is a proxy for the body itself.

Like in her writing, you can almost hear Bass rummaging through things, picking up each item or scanning each data point, before trying to figure out how they fit together, if at all. That sensitivity is jarring, particularly in an industry that relishes surface (even when it is couched in the language of something deeper).

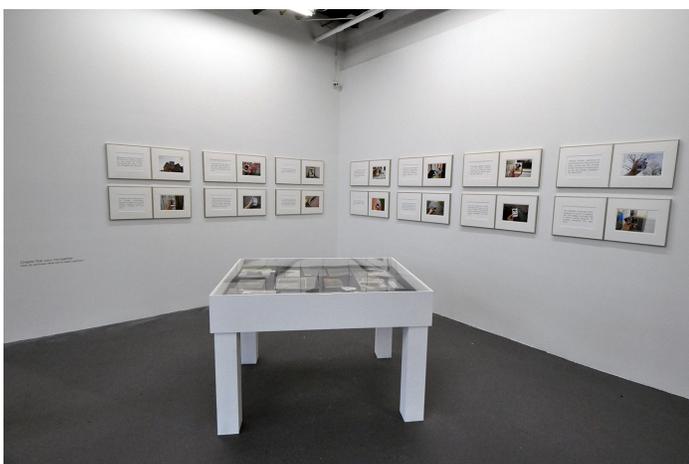


A view from the exhibition

Organized into eight chapters, Bass's solo exhibition at Knockdown Center, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, is organized by Alexis Wilkinson and it reveals a great deal of the artist's process. It comes across as a caring display of projects that remain human-scaled and accessible, even if they're laced with the often-cool conceptual language of contemporary art. The show's unique, book-like format, started as a joke, Bass recently explained to Jillian Steinhauer in an interview published by Temporary Art Review:

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 decision, which is a clever way to navigate the goal-oriented thinking that dominates conversations in the New York art community, reveals a bigger interest in a slow reading of relationships, as if she is building trust with the viewer as much as she does with her subjects and maybe herself. In the same interview, and another she did with Jessica Lynne for *Bomb* magazine, she is frank about what she doesn't know. It may be a matter-of-fact response, but in an industry often dominated by artist-hero myths, it feels unfamiliar. What do we seek, she seems to ask with a Yoda-like simplicity. The puzzle of knowing is central to the conversation.



Chapter One

Chapter one, which is titled "you+me together," documents 16 interactions with people who invited her to be a proxy for people who would normally enact the actions with a partner. Created during a residency at Spaces in Cleveland, Bass walked into scenarios where she was required to share a bottle of wine, walk a dog, and go to a movie with people who were initially strangers she encountered through her professional network or a Craigslist posting. The work in the gallery is archival, incorporating the residue of these events, including photos of significant components of the interaction. The display presents the whole process in a manicured way that suggests a homey respite — like walking into a well-designed Airbnb apartment, knowing it was prepared for your arrival. That atmosphere is evoked partly by the non-exotic flowers placed in old bottle vases throughout the Knockdown Center's gallery spaces. Whether set on podiums or on the floor, they introduce an intimacy to the pristine white space, suggesting a carefully considered placement that whispers life into the galleries.



Chapter Five

In chapter three (“We walk the world two by two”), the artist created permanent public installations in Greensboro, North Carolina, including one for Walter Jamison that reads: “In the early 1960s, this was Walter Jamison’s stopping place when walking down South Elm Street. Beyond this point he did not go. He remembers the blue-jeans smell of Blumenthal’s, the greasy bags of chips from Woolworth’s, and the unwritten rules of being a young black boy.” It solidifies an ephemeral experience, recounted through memory, and not verified through any other source. The artist leaves it as a subjective experience, and removes the veneer of common history in favor of a fragment of personal experience. We trust the plaque, which is shown in the gallery through photographs, because we can feel it. Why is that? Is it the smells the story evokes? Is it the well-known shops named? Perhaps the familiar hierarchy that we enact daily with race in public space? Has the artist built a bridge between us and the subject of the plaque? Bass renders the fleeting and sometimes unreliable crucible of experience visible. Negotiating the civic bureaucracy of Greensboro, she introduces meaning to one individual’s experience that may sound alien to future generations. It’s hard not to think she is trying to speak outside of our time and place, offering us another type of relationship with someone who could never reciprocate.

In the fourth chapter (“It’s amazing we don’t have more fights”), Bass measures bodies in space, specifically the distance between us and those with whom we interact. The work expands beyond the gallery into the bathroom, where a mirror tells us that the space is for resting, texting, or hiding. Another piece in a stall is printed onto a shelf and asks if you’d take something on it if it was there; a roll of toilet paper covered in her words in a Courier typeface reflects on private space. The idea is seemingly straightforward, but in these positions and locations where contemplation often involves a screen, the insertion of language directed at you reveals a type of disconnect that wakes you from the automatic behaviors we enact in such spaces. It reminded me of an incident in my childhood when I was confronted by the open toilet stalls in an Aleppo soccer stadium, and felt a sharp fear that my privacy would be violated. When I looked around, I realized I was the only person who felt this way, and it was my problem. My grandfather, who was holding my hand, couldn’t help but laugh, realizing I was harboring a volcano of confusion at being confronted with the scene. It wasn’t the first time the exhibition made me turn inward.

I found myself reflecting on my own relationships through the show, both past friendships and current ones. Bass’s work fosters an air of authenticity that seems to solicit this type of introspection, which is particularly strong because she refrains from offering us the emotional messaging that is often connected to such displays. There are few signs to indicate what to feel. She simply questions and records, and my feelings bubbled inside me.



A view of the bar at the Knockdown Center for Chlöe Bass’s *Book of Everyday Instruction*

I walked through the exhibition with my good friend, the artist Sharon Loudon, and we were eager to take a break after exploring most of the work. We sat at the Knockdown Center’s bar and looked at the menu of cocktails designed to accompany the exhibition. We drank in Bass-designed plastic cups that read, “Patterns sometimes hurt because they’re boring,” and used her carefully prepared black cocktail napkins emblazoned with a silvery phrase: “We make sense of things by being together.” Sharon’s presence made the experience real, or *realer*, like two people at a play in search of a mirror for our experience. But I also knew we were experiencing this in a way no one else could or would.

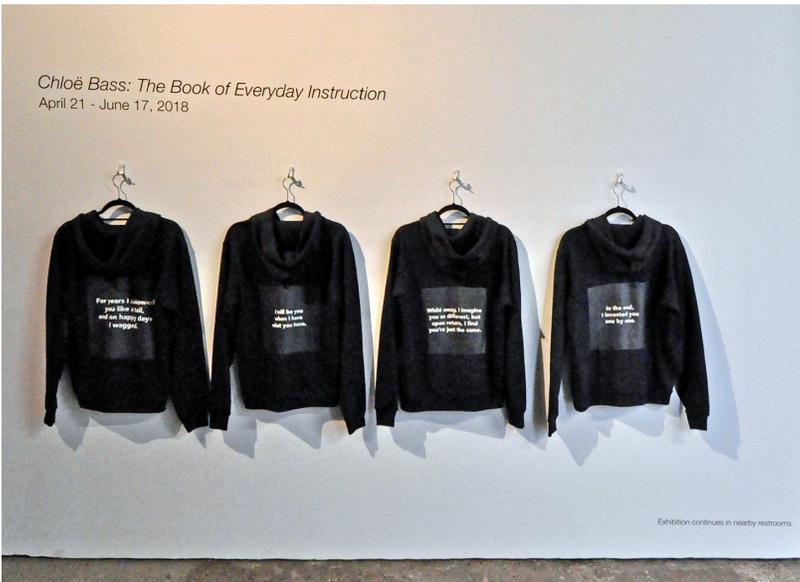
The drinks (we had two each, according to Sharon, though I remember having three to her two) and popcorn lubricated our conversation. We seemed happy to step outside of Bass’s laboratory of relationships, but here we were, still engaged in another way. The work had snaked into our brains. We grabbed a pile of napkins and a few extra cups when the bartender stepped away. I’m not sure what we hoped to keep, whether it was the artful bar ware, or a reminder of that experience. What would the cups and napkins evoke when we saw them again weeks, months, or years from now?



From chapter eight

We didn't return to the exhibition after our hour of being in the space. There was more to see, but we had reached full capacity. The unpacking was emotionally and intellectually taxing, but it certainly wasn't limited to the objects or art in the exhibition.

In the exhibition's final chapter, "Complete upon arrival," Bass asks: "Do we invent the people we love?" The display is one of the show's most cryptic, as she selects people in her life to wear hoodies with words printed on their backs but offers little insight into the individuals, who are shown in photographs facing away from us. The sweaters hang nearby at the entrance of the exhibition, closing the sequence in the space from beginning to end, but they leave no clues about the people who wore them. Like a sweater from a lover, they hang blankly for our inspection. We're left with the gnawing feeling that love is how we reproduce ourselves in others. Not like copies or proxies, but as surrogates who we fill with our needs and hope they don't notice. When we're lucky, they let us.



At the entrance to Bass's exhibition at the Knockdown Center

Chloë Bass's The Book of Everyday Instruction continues at the Knockdown Center (52-19 Flushing Avenue, Maspeth, Queens) through June 17.