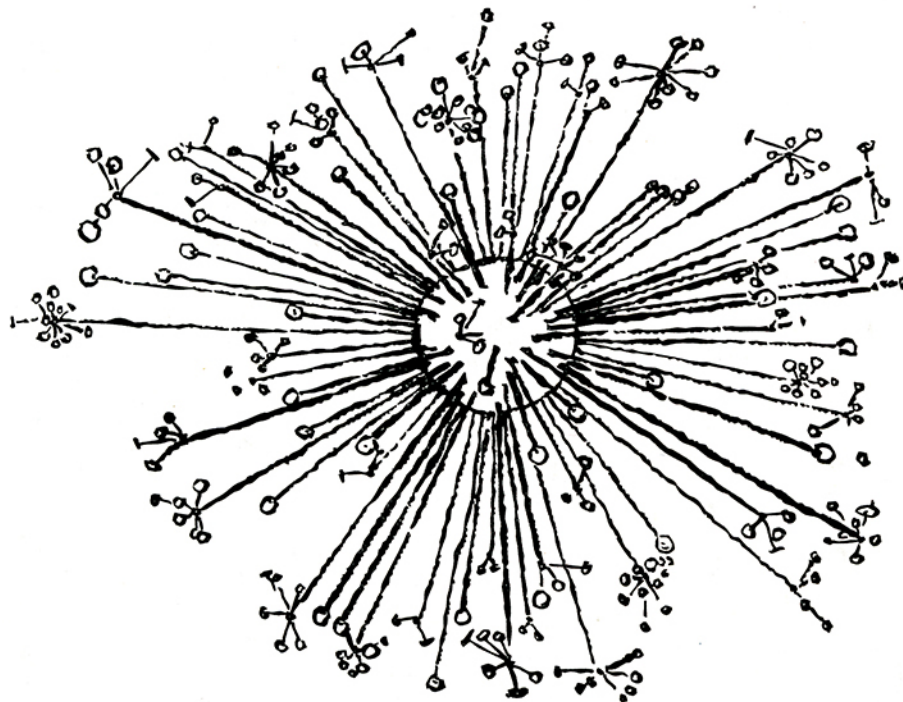


JOSIAH McELHENY

SOME PICTURES

of the

INFINITE



ICA HATJE
CANTZ

Josiah McElheny

SOME PICTURES
of the
1 N F I N I T E

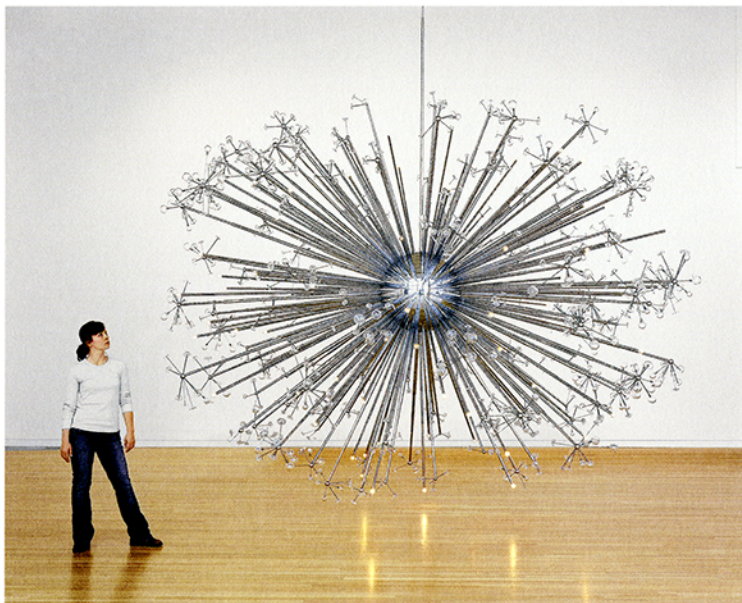
HELEN MOLESWORTH

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

DOUG ASHFORD, GREGG BORDOWITZ, MOYRA DAVEY,
ANDREA GEYER, MARIA GOUGH, BILL HORRIGAN, ZOE LEONARD,
R. H. QUAYTMAN, AND TAYLOR WALSH

THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART/BOSTON

**HATJE
CANTZ**



Josiah McElheny, *An End to Modernity*, 2005, nickel-plated aluminum, electric lighting, hand-blown glass, steel cable, and rigging, approx. 180 x 180 x 150 inches

TALKING ABOUT THE WORK OF JOSIAH McELHENY

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
DOUG ASHFORD, BILL HERRIGAN, AND HELEN MOLESWORTH

MOLESWORTH

This conversation came about because Josiah felt that he had been involved in a lot of interviews about his work and he was feeling a little skeptical or ambivalent about the prevalence of his voice in the interpretation of his work. He called me one evening from the street after hearing Doug Ashford's presentation at the New Museum. He was very excited, Doug, by the way you discussed abstraction and its relation to the social, and by extension, the political. He felt both sympathetic to and challenged by what you were saying and suggested that you might be an interesting interlocutor in a dialogue about his work. He had no idea when he called that you and I have a long history together—we've taught together and have been friends since the mid-1990s—so for me it was a happy coincidence.

HERRIGAN

Great minds.

MOLESWORTH

Well, similar minds! History will parse the merits. (laughter) Bill Herrigan and I are working on two different exhibitions with Josiah, each of which acts as a kind of episodic survey of his practice. The exhibition at the ICA/Boston focuses primarily on Josiah's works that engage with the problem of time. This preoccupation is seen from early works that deal with the problem of how to represent archeological time—using

glass shards and fragments—up through his most recent explorations of the Big Bang and cosmological time. This interest in time frequently manifests itself as an interest in infinity, the problem of both time and space. So the task before us today is to try and think about Josiah's work in relationship to these issues, but also in relationship to the ideas at play in the exhibition Bill is organizing at the Wexner Center. Bill, do you want to say a little bit about the concerns of the Wexner Center exhibition?

HERRIGAN

I've known Josiah, slightly, over a long period of time, basically as the guy who does these amazing pieces in glass and mirrors. And when he was developing *An End to Modernity* for Helen's exhibition *Part Object Part Sculpture* at the Wexner, he was around a lot and he'd always want to talk about cinema and books, which I found unexpected and refreshing. He's since ventured into making films—he made one based on ideas generated by the sculpture he did for you, Helen, and after that a bit more. He's currently working on a film based on Paul Scheerbert's novella *The Light Club of Batavia*, which is the text that overall informs the Wexner exhibition.¹ It interested me that while he has a central identification with glass and sculpture, he keeps trying to escape that, or, to put it another way, he wants his sculptural practice to be able to bear the load, or

the weight, or the opportunity, of moving images and books, these various kinds of histories and narratives. That's why he interests me, quite frankly. And it's why our show favors projections. It is not an object-centered show; it's more of an immersive sound, light, and mirror experience, anchored in Josiah's ideas about the utopian potential of glass and the modernist enterprise.

MOLESWORTH

I think that when most people think of Josiah's work, they think of glass and mirror pieces. I like this idea of Bill's that the work can bear the weight of other formations. His practice is quite singular—yes, Roni Horn makes glass, Dale Chihuly makes glass, but Josiah makes a very particularly authored form of glass. Is there also a way that he's running away from the beautiful, from the very thing that makes him recognizable, successful, and well known?

HERRIGAN

Yes, and this is the same impulse that makes him resist a mid-career retrospective. He recoiled at the thought of that, from the idea that it would essentialize his work and in that way also pigeonhole it, at least potentially. I think he's very canny about these decisions in his own career. But at the same time it strikes me as a disinterested restlessness.

ASHFORD

There's something else, which may be my projection only. When Josiah came to talk to my seminar at the Cooper Union, one of the things he spoke about was labor. It occurred to me then that he had an investment in work itself, in the process of labor as, ideally, regenerative, in both a transcendental and a revolutionary way. His interest seemed to be not just in work in the phenomenal sense, as in being about the productive body, but also work in its social dimension, as a form of identification with others through what they do. I feel that this has something to do with an idea of trying to look at abstract experiences as something that can remake social relations.

HERRIGAN

It might come from the history of glass blowing being taught via the master-apprentice relationship. This is

interesting because in that relationship the masters are the bearers of history in a kind of serial way. Perhaps that's why his historical objects are so far-reaching.

ASHFORD

As artists we are always asked to declare singular authorship. For me the question becomes, at what level are we ever alone? Can we talk of collaboration outside linear time? I remember in the Group Material days people would say, "Oh, it is so unusual that you're working with others." But I didn't know any artists who weren't working with others, who didn't have a desire to disinterest themselves in the authorship of their work. There is the old cliché that art is theft, but it's not theft per se, it's really a set of extended interactions and conversations with a lot of other kinds of work that have come before. What I find unique about Josiah is that, in addition to being engaged in how the work gets situated in people's imaginations (as in books and films), he's also declarative about the collective aspect of the production of knowledge that becomes his work.

MOLESWORTH

The other thing that Josiah talks about, in addition to the intensity of his desire during his student days for a kind of master-apprentice relationship (as opposed to the dominant pedagogy of the '80s, which was largely "crit"-based), is the importance of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. These two lineages, on the one hand the hierarchical, task-based, repetitive, oral tradition of master-apprentice, and on the other the conceptual, contract-based, audience-centric, generous, re-skilled practice of Gonzalez-Torres, seem profoundly at odds with each other. But the idea of the contract set forth by Gonzalez-Torres was really important to Josiah. Perhaps this helps reimagine the contractual relationship of master-apprentice? We know about the kinds of obligations that Gonzalez-Torres's work places on both its owner and the spectator: someone sources the candy, installs the candy, takes the candy, eats the candy, and throws the candy away at the end of the show. One of the things this does is to visualize the network of labor and interdependence that



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (USA Today), 1990, endless supply of candies individually wrapped in red, silver, and blue cellophane, ideal weight 300 lbs., dimensions variable

permits art's existence. I think these two modalities—master-apprentice and Gonzalez-Torres—get at Doug's sense of varying models for what it means to work communally.

HERRIGAN

When we first started talking about these exhibitions, one of our first ideas was that we could do two "survey" exhibitions simultaneously that would be different in each location, and the model we pointed to was the exhibition of Felix's that was traveling around Europe, curated by a different person at each venue so it effectively became a different show using the same objects.²

ASHFORD

As you said, Felix's pieces don't work without the engagement of the viewer. Felix was really invested, in a Brechtian way, in the audience's role in the production of meaning.

MOLESWORTH

I wonder if some of the things we just said are a way to start talking about Josiah's mirror pieces. Just what is the relationship that Josiah's work wants to have with the spectator? To speak reductively, there are two kinds of mirror pieces: there are the mirror pieces in which one can see oneself and the ones where one can't. So there are the straight-ahead mirror pieces like the Borges mirror pieces or mirrors that have designs etched into them, and there is the reflective chrome

plating on the chandelier sculptures, which functions as a mirror, albeit offering you your image in miniature. And there are the mirror pieces that use two-way mirrors: in these, the mirrors reflect objects but you never see yourself. It's a very uncanny and disturbing viewing experience, because you expect to see yourself, or, rather—to be more precise—you realize, quite slowly, that "hey, I don't see myself. Why not? Where am I?" This is profoundly weird: mirrors everywhere but no people in their reflections.

HERRIGAN

There's also the new series of work, *Screen for Observing Abstractions*, commissioned by the Whitechapel Gallery in London. These works are hard to describe, but basically they are a combination of mirrors, projection glass, and cloth panels, joined in a sculptural configuration that is attached to poles running from floor to ceiling; onto these is projected a compilation program of abstract film. The projected image hits the glass and mirrors and sometimes bounces back, sometimes doubles or refracts. And in some of the pieces you can see yourself in the mirror. All the while the abstract film is running in a loop that alters the original in a tripartite set of inversions: the films are run backward or in reverse, upside down, and mirrored or flipped. These works are very enigmatic to me; I think they might use mirrors in yet another way.

MOLESWORTH

You are absolutely correct. I just saw those pieces and the grade of mirror used is so high that the reflection you see of yourself is uncannily "perfect." There is something almost funny about this work. It feels as if there's nothing more marginalized than the history of abstract cinema, and when it is given a platform it is subjected to the oldest joke about abstraction: if you don't like it, just turn it upside down or flip it over. It suggests that abstract film has no orientation to the world.

HERRIGAN

He's re-abstracting it. But the way I would understand the humor is that it is a way to resolve our anxiety with abstraction. It seeks to create a context in which the

reference or the referent of the experience has to be taken beyond what is understood by people to be the work or the discourse around the work.

MOLESWORTH

So, is the humor partly a way to reposition the viewer as the person in control of the abstraction?

ASHFORD

Perhaps this is why Josiah was interested in my take on his work . . . because I am trying to figure out how my social practice of the last twenty years has a relationship to abstract form. I see abstraction as a kind of imagined dislocation, as a way to look beyond existing institutions and laws for new definitions of the self. I'm thinking about how to model the emotional connections between people and how they can become visual references. For me it goes to the heart of the social contract, when anxiety (or its release) can be acknowledged in the "ideal" of abstract form. Art points to the connections we have outside instrumental logic, outside our usefulness.

MOLESWORTH

May I ask you a dumb question?

ASHFORD

Of course—this is very dumb thinking . . . (laughter)

MOLESWORTH

The history of abstraction in painting, sculpture, and cinema is really a twentieth-century formation. You are saying that it is not a transcendental mode, outside language, which is how abstraction is typically discussed. Instead, you want to figure out a way to talk about abstraction as reflective of social interactions up to, and even encompassing, the social contract.

ASHFORD

Yes, but I wouldn't want to refuse the transcendental either. And it's obvious that Josiah is intellectually invested in social projects of early modernism—I'm thinking about his interest in Bruno Taut and the crystal mountain,³ Auguste Blanqui's treatise on cosmology,⁴ or René Daumal's search for the ultimate mountain⁵—all of which are early modernist examples of places where the transcendental and the social contract both seem totally manifest. Somewhere along the line, formalist

ideas about abstraction—in which abstraction is separated from its social implications—became the dominant mode of thinking. We began to believe in the idealization of form as separate from the remaking of the real. In Josiah's case, it's clear that he takes particular epiphanies and, through the act of visualizing them as sculpture—as something that is evident and unavoidable in its thingness—makes the friction between transcendental ideas about reflection/infinity and aspirational or emotional ideas about reflection/infinity, in close proximity to one another, understandable. The question is, at what point can we come to an understanding of form as a crucial part of political practices without getting bogged down in instrumentalizing artworks, without assigning socially inspired art practices as a kind of menu for what people should or should not do, without enumerating virtues, without accounting for what is good and bad?

So, for instance, can we see the prismatic aspect of some of Josiah's work as a model of social relations that is . . .

MOLESWORTH

. . . not a reductive gesture?

ASHFORD

Right, not reductive, but inclusive, excessively inclusive. As perhaps an infinite restating of inclusion: it's this and this and this . . . and this too!

HERRIGAN

I wonder whether he's considered pre-1930 abstract film, with its occasionally radical relation to mainstream cinema and hence maybe its status as cinema's hope, its future, as similar to what glass was for architecture. These ideas were operating on uneven parallel tracks, and maybe even some of the people overlapped from one milieu to the other. Poetically, anyway, it seems like the Whitechapel pieces could be a convergence of explorations of a given medium (glass, abstract cinema) and political or social aspiration, culminating in something like the following proposition: Let's see if abstract film really can save the world the way we wanted glass architecture to save the world, and what happens when you literally graft these two formations onto each other?

ASHFORD

Abstract film did not even save cinema.

HERRIGAN

I know. (laughter)

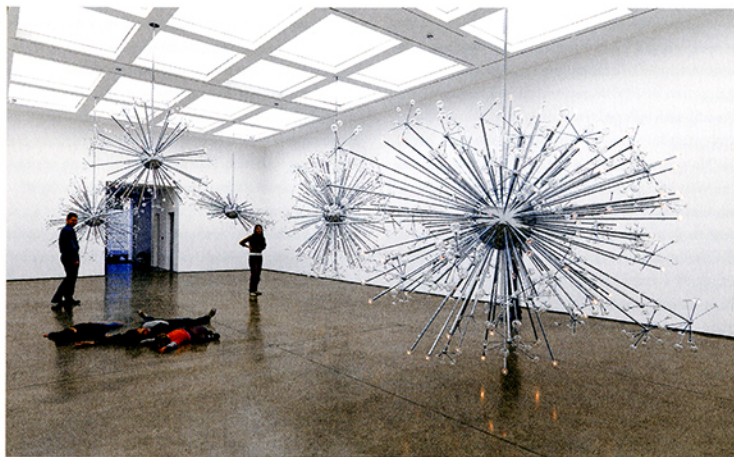
MOLESWORTH

I think that's right, whether Josiah has it at the forefront of his intentionality or not. Certainly something that runs through the whole practice is a recuperative gesture around modernism, in which the task of the work and the task of artist is not to negate modernism for what it did wrong, but rather to find in the modernist project the paths not taken and to mine them for their lost possibilities.

ASHFORD

I've always wanted to talk to Josiah about the degree to which institutional settings and the ideas that come from art history contribute to the understanding of his work. For instance, the piece he did for the Wexner—*An End to Modernity*—requires an amazing degree of cultural literacy. Its layers of meaning go on and on: there's his meeting with the physicist; then,

there's the physicist's relationship to other physicists; then, there's the history of science and an understanding of Kantian cosmological ideas; and then, there's a boomerang effect, where those cosmological concepts are seen to resonate with ideas proposing political revolution and, even further, with the emergence of a dark sensibility about the remaking of time through destruction. My point in bringing all this up is to say that this grand line of recuperation anchors one's thinking about time in the physical effect of sculpture. The object's reflective properties are part and parcel of its social engagement with audiences (I'm thinking here of the installation photo of *Island Universe* at White Cube in London, with all those children lying underneath the sculptures [below]), especially the playful or ludic experiences people seem to have when looking at each other and looking at the thing ("Look, I see you, do you see you?"). For me, the ideas of the reflection and recuperative histories are beautifully related. Josiah is making sculptural experiences in which people can literally and metaphorically see themselves in something that



Josiah McElheny, *Island Universe*, 2008

comes from work. My best times teaching are when people are playing and learning. Seeing ourselves in the act of comprehension is an emotional experience at the center of learning; it allows us to ask, Why? So, a question I have is, Why aren't the historical citations of these works felt as a burden?

MOLESWORTH

That's an interesting question. If part of Josiah's agenda is to try and think through the relations between the social contract and abstraction, then I'd like to talk about the kinds of experiences I find people have of *Czech Modernism Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely* [2005; p. 70], a work frequently on view at the ICA/Boston. The piece is comprised of mirrored vases housed in a mirrored vitrine that allows you to see an endlessly reflected image of the vases—a truly spectacular mise en abyme—and yet you do not see yourself. My experience as a curator is that, for the most part, what people experience in response to this object are feelings of profound pleasure, amazement, and wonder. Yet when I talk about *Czech Modernism* publicly and discuss my sense of dread and horror, which is what the object engenders in me, when I describe a world of infinitely reproducible objects that are unfaithfully the same, in which no human agent exists . . .

ASHFORD

A world with no ego.

MOLESWORTH

Yes. No ego, no body. It's like the Borg, it's like a sci-fi version of capitalism. When I say these things, I find that I have to be gentle, I have to lead people to the idea slowly, because if I begin there, the crash, the affective letdown, is so hard.

ASHFORD

It's so counterintuitive.

MOLESWORTH

Yes, I know. Here is this experience of sheer, spectacularized pleasure and wonder and I come in and "ruin" it for them. I mean, it's not hard to get people to realize the dark implications of the piece. If this is a model of the social, then it is not a place where you want to live. That being said, I've watched a lot of people dispense with the

darkness of the work almost immediately on assimilating it, and move back into the much more comforting place of wonder. So, for all of the sculpture's explorations of the roads of modernism not taken, for all of its querying of utopianism, there's a deep strain of foreboding in it. The work can be quite dark, as it intimates that the thing that you want is also the thing that is unsustainable.

ASHFORD

Could we say that, in a sense, abstraction is always dealing with that kind of tension? That we depend on its flexibility to engage with experiences that cannot be reduced to mimetic or realistic relationships—that we need abstraction to re-imagine the real? It reminds me of Wilhelm Worringer's idea of the artwork as an act of mediation between the self and the immeasurable world; at a certain point, there are conditions that can't be represented.

MOLESWORTH

Or they can't be mediated.

ASHFORD

Right, they can't be mediated, so, as artists, that's where we begin. We have to engage with the possibility of expanding generosity and aspiration, but also with finitude. So if I'm going to make an image of death, I'm going to make it as somehow catapulted into the identities of other people who survive, who cohabit in this helplessness. I'm finding myself drawn back to Josiah's many points of origins, some of which are just devastating—Bruno Taut's making a religion of glass, Paul Scheerbart's fantasy of sociality based in light.

HERRIGAN

Taut and Scheerbart are figures who continue to inspire him profoundly—various texts by Scheerbart, but especially his *Glass Architecture* book from 1914, and, naturally, Taut's Glass Pavilion that same year, which had aphorisms by Scheerbart inscribed in its interior. In some ways that project—the Glass Pavilion—was a utopian folly, but it's often these examples that remain inspiring. And the *Light Club* text spins the glass/utopia idea further, into an odd little fiction about rich people resolving to build an elaborate light-filled spa at the bottom of a mine shaft.



Glass Pavilion, designed by Bruno Taut for the Deutscher Werkbund Exhibition, Cologne, Germany, 1914

MOLESWORTH

Well, one does find oneself in a pickle with Josiah's work. You walk alongside him on this modernist path not taken, suffused with the pursuit of a more utopian situation, and then you find yourself at the bottom of a cave hoping for the purifying principles of light. It's easy to end up thinking, "Well fuck, no wonder we didn't take this path, because it leads to this freakish dead end."

ASHFORD

I don't want to go there unless we have a pitcher of martinis.

MOLESWORTH

An infinite pitcher of martinis. I think this search for and belief in utopia happens in the cosmological work too. I think he wants to see the history of the Big Bang in the object world, and further to situate it within the shift from modernism to postmodernism (hence the title of the first sculpture, *An End to Modernity*), from a theory of the universe to a theory of the multiverse. And he pursues this line of thinking until he realizes that most advanced theoretical physicists of our time are in search of a theory of everything, and he has a moment of recoil and realizes that, Oh my god, these guys really do want a theory of everything. I imagine it's at this moment that he lifts himself out of the

project with a kind of horror, saying something like "I don't believe in a theory of everything. I don't believe, when it comes to the social, that there is a mathematical theory that would explain everything in a way that would eliminate paradox."

And that's when he begins to shift away from the cosmological material and move into another body of work, taking some of the ideas about infinity and repetition and exploring them through the exhibition *The Past Was a Mirage I'd Left Behind* at Whitechapel or the piece he made with Andrea Geyer called *The Infinite Repetition of Revolt* [2010–12; p. 93], where the wires of the Big Bang are crossed with a Nietzschean "eternal return of the same." I think he has turned, or returned, to abstraction at this moment because the "theory of everything" is too scary.

HERRIGAN

I thought the theory of everything could be very dark philosophically—once everything's understood, it's nothing. Or if everything is happening simultaneously, if it's truly a multiverse, whatever we're engaged with now is relatively unimportant to its infinite repositioning of all the different realities of time and space.

MOLESWORTH

Although, technically speaking, it's not unimportant, because the multiverse functions isotropically, which Josiah defines as meaning that any one event is just as important (or interesting)—or not—as any other event.

ASHFORD

And when that fear is made into an object and there are people in the room who collectively experience it outside its programmatic darkness, the possibility of optimism opens up. Worringer said that if the darkness of the world can be externalized onto an object, then it can reflect back onto us. We can see these struggles with meaning in terms of unforeseen possibilities in reassessment and revolution. Once Josiah is able to inscribe the idea of infinity onto an object embodied through history and our sense of the work of others, it becomes a metaphoric proposal that, for me, is significantly hopeful.

MOLESWORTH

Like the *Czech Modernism* piece?

ASHFORD

Exactly.

MOLESWORTH

So you are saying that once you make an object that actually does offer you an image of infinity, you are able to transvalue the horror into wonder because it's an object.

ASHFORD

Right.

MOLESWORTH

Because the haptic quality of the object allows you to project and displace and transfer—all those psychoanalytic mechanisms—your ego onto it.

ASHFORD

And as such, you can take it with you and turn it into other kinds of work. I would even like to think that the world itself can change in accordance with this externalization of the ego.

HERRIGAN

This is compounded, as far as the wonder those pieces inspire, by an intense desire to own them. You want this object and you sort of justify those feelings of desire and wanting by understanding how wondrous it is.

ASHFORD

And the appetite for wonder grows. I was introduced to Josiah's works in the late '90s at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and I remember *really* wanting them, wanting to stay with them, wanting to own them. There was a piece about a glass that falls and doesn't break and there was a little reproduction of the Gardner's Bellini painting that this fabled glass is pictured in, and I wanted it. But so much more than the sources of my regular consumerist rush: the desire his objects provoke is beyond the fantasy of additive self-completion offered at the shopping center. It is oddly subtractive. It's like wanting someone who is gone.

MOLESWORTH

That's the phantasmatic part of his recreations. This piece of glass no longer exists, but . . .

ASHFORD

"I'm gonna make it!" (laughter)

MOLESWORTH

And because I am a lone producer trained in an artisanal mode, it won't be fake or kitsch or wrong . . .

ASHFORD

. . . or virtual.

MOLESWORTH

It will be physical, real, and will have the patina of my breath.

ASHFORD

Glass is really the perfect medium for his project in so many ways. It's glass artifacts that can't make it through time. And in terms of labor, in terms of maintenance, there's a certain kind of attention one pays to glass—the anxiety of the window washer, the way it can be broken. And then there's its transparency, its reflectiveness . . .

MOLESWORTH

And there's its physical property of being liquid. It's always moving; it is not ever wholly inert. God, it just seems like the ultimate medium all of the sudden! The real question is, why doesn't everybody work in glass, why do only a handful of people work in glass?

ASHFORD

And then there is the idea of perfection in relation to the transparency of glass, whether it is the glass tower of Bruno Taut or the Mies van der Rohe Barcelona Pavilion or the Philip Johnson Glass House, and a

Josiah McElheny, *Recreating a Miraculous Object*, 1997–99Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning*, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona, 1999, transparency in lightbox, 73 1/8 x 138 1/8 inches

sense of socialized living space, complete with ideas of structural and physiological emancipation.

MOLESWORTH

Is the transparency of glass as it manifests itself in architecture something Josiah is playing with? I don't know my architectural history very well. Is the operative assumption that transparency is utopian, and hence privacy is no longer necessary? Or is the transparency of glass related to representation, as in, meaning is simply meaning, it no longer needs a conduit? Maybe I can phrase that differently: Is it a utopian dream that there's no form carrying meaning because meaning exists publicly?

HERRIGAN

I don't know if there was any coherent, unified theory historically about what glass architecture was doing, but I do think part of it has to do with—assuming it's an early twentieth-century intellectual current—announcing a radical break from the stultified nineteenth-century domestic interior, where everything is inward-looking (flagrantly so in Vienna), where everything is concealed and nothing is as it appears, and everything operates under a veil of more

or less openly sanctioned hypocrisy. So the impetus was to dispel that.

ASHFORD

So it's both symbolic and programmatic?

HERRIGAN

Exactly. Scheerbart and Taut (and others) wrote explicitly, as well as metaphorically, about glass and color and light in relation to modern buildings and by extension to modern life. So they would have been involved in more than just glancing references to both the aspirational and the practical effects of transparency, which again has to do with light, which connotes an awful lot. It connotes everything.

ASHFORD

In a sense, this resonates with a lot of Josiah's work: how do you liberate the tenets of modernity without reminding us of its repressive program? The programmatic implications of these ideas became the dark side we live with—our contemporary Death Star. Why do perfect worlds become monstrous when they are put to programmatic application? We want to hold onto them as provisional as long as we can. As long as they are models, as long as they're . . .

MOLESWORTH

They're propositional if they function as a "what if"?

ASHFORD

Yes, the nonprogrammatic aspect is extremely important, and extremely difficult to maintain under the auspices of today's repellent art system.

MOLESWORTH

At some point, Josiah leaves off his work with the archeological fragment, and by 2000 he's remaking modernist design objects. I wonder if the design objects both escape the programmatic aspect of modernism and function as residue of the programmatic aspect. After all, they were the things that were literally supposed to change our everyday lives. So, is Josiah's fascination with recreating them a way for him to re-inhabit them? I'm haunted by the idea that making glass is something he has to do with his breath. Therefore, the game isn't to reanimate a dead form, but rather to inhabit it in a reciprocal way that releases the design object from the modernist program even though the object was precisely the vehicle that was supposed to get the program to the people (eat out of this cup, live in this kind of interior, and everything will change); so it's artifact and agent simultaneously.

ASHFORD

That's fantastic!

MOLESWORTH

Thanks. So, how do we get back to Josiah and his concerns with mirrors, light, and reflectivity? In both the everyday modernist objects and these new, complicated film apparatuses, I find that the viewer is essential for Josiah. That the work goes out into public, and engenders a public, feels like a very important part of it. I don't take this to be self-evident. For instance, when I am in the presence of a Damien Hirst, I don't feel that I am particularly necessary, whereas in Josiah's work there's an intensely narcissistic pleasure in seeing one's reflection, which makes you think: "I'm actually necessary to complete this work."

HERRIGAN

The Wexner Center just did a project with Alexis Rockman, who couldn't be less like Josiah. Alexis's

work is theatrically scaled. It almost literally imagines people standing there and looking at it. It is very nineteenth-century in that respect—as if to say, This thing has come to town, and now let's go look at it and talk about it.

MOLESWORTH

It's interesting to think about Alexis and Josiah together because both are invested in narrative in different ways. For Alexis, the narrative is all in the pictures and for Josiah the narrative is always supplemental. They are both invested in ideas of utopia and dystopia. There's a kind of profound anxiety that is the motor of the work. I think Josiah has the faith that the world can be remade. With Alexis, I often feel that the affect is "Yup, we broke it. That's right. You break it, you buy it." So with Alexis the monstrous is much more present, whereas there's a kind of optimism in Josiah's work that is manifested in the physical qualities of perfection that shape it. And yet the projects all embody a kind of failure. Doug, you have intimated that within that failure there's renewable possibility. Does that mean perfection is stasis? Does perfection imply that something is over? And yet Josiah doesn't build failure into the object, so are the failures always in the program?

ASHFORD

Yes, but isn't failure always implicitly generous? The object is a provisional model of an idea: it's history in performance; it's in drag. So maybe when we are talking about failure, we are really thinking about the *presentation* of failure. In a certain kind of performance, the failure of an idea happens only through its acknowledgment, which permits failure to become representative of a deep optimism. It is about being able to see things in the future, about creating certain kinds of capacities for us, even if they appear imperfect, or not to work.

MOLESWORTH

So can we return to the viewer of *Czech Modernism* and my guise as an institutional subject, leading the audience to the place of horror, telling them what to think?



Alexis Rockman, *Biosphere: Orchids*, 1993, oil on wood, 18 x 24 inches

HERRIGAN

Don't get your hopes up. (laughter)

MOLESWORTH

Are the visitors who turn their back on that and decide that "that's all very well and good—I'm going to stick with wonder and delight" in some way the better viewer of Josiah's work than I am, because in the end they are choosing . . .

ASHFORD

. . . life?

MOLESWORTH

Yes, by being optimistic, they choose life.

ASHFORD

Somebody's got to! (laughter) Another way of framing this question might be: "Is there an ideal you never

stop trying to reach, even though your work is always incommensurate with it?"

These days I am trying to have a daily painting practice and my work is filled with tons of repetition and tons of boring labor. My mind is consistently filled with two intermingling ideas: the product of my labor and the experience of its production. They are both enmeshed in real and imagined histories and experiences. And yet for the studio artist maybe there is the constant, almost unbearable, sense that the product and the experience are incommensurate with each other. This tension is related to the energy between the referent of the real and the abstract ideals we were talking about earlier. I think Josiah's work is a very upfront presentation of this dilemma.

HERRIGAN

And there's a lineage or genealogy that he's mindful of and that he's participating in, even in failing. Failure is built into his acceptance of the mantle.

MOLESWORTH

I think Josiah's practice and the reception of his practice have a kind of incommensurateness that rhymes with what Doug is describing in his own studio practice. Josiah has an ability to make beautiful things that occupy the object world of beautiful things with great ease, with a kind of seamlessness. It's as if the glass literally allowed them to slip into this big stream of covetable shiny objects. But his interests don't remain there. We've talked about how Josiah has attempted to construct an apparatus of reception around the work—through films, books, and performances. Is that because the Museum—capital M—is ambivalent about removing his work from the realm of beautiful things?

ASHFORD

In a certain way, all art fails in the contemporary museum. If part of Josiah's project is a recuperative gesture in relation to modernism, then I can't help thinking about what we lost when we turned the display of art into a monument. There are other kinds of display and understanding of artworks, more proximate to possession, that many museums seem to be no longer able to fulfill.

MOLESWORTH

My experience of art happens predominantly in museums. That being said, Josiah gave Susan and me one of his works as a wedding present.

ASHFORD

Is it glass?

MOLESWORTH

Yes, it is one of the pieces he makes specifically for people who have gotten married. There are two glasses held together with a glass chain, and the stem of each glass is composed of a set of forms that interlock with the other. Within each of them and the chain there is an infinitely repeating pattern, a white line that resembles a Möbius strip. One glass has my name etched on it and other my wife's name. In order to drink out of

them, you have to do so simultaneously; you can only use them if someone else is using them too. I think of this because, of course, no museum visitor will ever have this quite incredible experience of using them as objects.

ASHFORD

Does he want you to use them or do you have them in a box somewhere?

MOLESWORTH

The glasses were made during the early part of Josiah's career; they are accompanied by a framed certificate that explains their origin as a Renaissance tradition he discovered when he was studying that period's painting.

ASHFORD

So the work, the gift, has a didactic component?

MOLESWORTH

Yes, and our names are on the certificate as well, so in effect it also works as a marriage certificate. It's really an extraordinary piece, largely because it asks you to inhabit the world according to Josiah. It is an object that cannot be broken asunder, unless, of course . . .

ASHFORD

. . . you break up (laughing), and then the piece doesn't work; it's gone.

MOLESWORTH

Right, who would want it?!

ASHFORD

Nobody.

MOLESWORTH

Exactly. But using them creates a very delicate, contradictory space of failure and pleasure.

HERRIGAN

And anxiety.

MOLESWORTH

Yes, and anxiety, because the chain makes a noise.

ASHFORD

Shut up! (laughter) How long is the chain?

MOLESWORTH

About seven inches.

ASHFORD

So you have to put your heads next to each other's.

MOLESWORTH

Oh, you have to be very, very close.

ASHFORD

Cheek to cheek.

MOLESWORTH

Yes. It's very intimate, it's like dancing, it's like making love, it's pleasurable and awkward. You know how to do it and you don't know how to at the same time. I've always had a sentimental attachment to them because they were a gift, on the occasion of my wedding, from an artist whom I love and admire and respect. But thinking about them now, in terms of this conversation, I would say they embody almost everything we've talked about, both in the questions they provoke—how to display them, how to use them, what it means to use them—and the feelings they engender: the anxiety, the fear of failure, the pleasure, the wonderment . . .

ASHFORD

. . . the joke.

MOLESWORTH

The joke, the love! The aspirational quality of believing that we will be together forever. Marriage is nothing if not aspirational, and it's all about how you're going to conduct yourself around death.

ASHFORD

We are back to infinity.

MOLESWORTH

Yes, the love is infinite and even though the love will die, there is the fantasy of its living on in the object world. There's a program and yet there is not a program.

ASHFORD

Right, it's *not* a program—it's an emotional moment during which you can really feel the nonprogrammatic part of the object's proposition.

MOLESWORTH

Right, because there's no program for how to use them, even though they exist as a daily object in my house.

ASHFORD

But they're not in the kitchen cabinet with other glasses, right?

MOLESWORTH

No, they occupy the place of an objet d'art: they are on a shelf with a lamp, behind the stereo. I turn on the lamp, I turn on the stereo and there are the glasses.

ASHFORD

Remind me not to bring my cat to your house. (laughter)

MOLESWORTH

Exactly! All right, is this a good place to stop?

ASHFORD

Yes, this is a really good place to stop.

1. Josiah McElheny, *The Light Club: On Paul Scheerbart's "The Light Club of Batavia,"* with contributions by Gregg Bordowitz and Ulrike Müller, Andrea Geyer, and Brandon W. Joseph; translations by Wilhelm Werthern and Barbara Schroeder of original texts by Paul Scheerbart and Georg Hecht (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
2. *Felix Gonzalez-Torres Specific Objects without Specific Form*, conceived by Elena Filipovic, was installed by artists Danh Vo at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, 2010; Carol Bove at Fondation Beyeler, Basel, 2010; and Tino Schgal at Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, 2011.
3. Bruno Taut was an architect in Germany after World War I who published a book of his utopian architectural fantasies, *Alpine Architecture* (1920), in which he advocated, among other things, construction of a "crystal building" of colored glass for the purpose of contemplation.
4. Auguste Louis Blanqui was a Marxist revolutionary who, while imprisoned during the Paris Commune of 1871, wrote a tract called *L'Éternité par les autres*, in which he surmised that the infinite quality of space and time must mean that there are endless worlds that repeat themselves endlessly. As an artist project, McElheny commissioned and edited the first English translation of Blanqui's text, excerpts of which appear in works in the current exhibition, such as the photogravure edition *Eternity through the Stars* and a performance by McElheny and Andrea Geyer.
5. René Daumal was a French surrealist writer and poet who co-founded the collective and literary journal *Le Grand Jeu*. His writings, such as the unfinished novel "Mount Analogue: A Tale of Non-Euclidean and Symbolically Authentic Mountaineering Adventures," stressed the irrational nature of enlightenment as a force of social and metaphysical reorganization.

CONTRIBUTORS

Doug Ashford is a New York-based teacher, artist, and writer. He is currently associate professor at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York, where he has taught design, sculpture, and theory for over twenty years. Ashford's principal art practice from 1982 to 1996 was as a member of the artist collaborative Group Material. Since then Ashford has made paintings, published writings, and produced independent public projects. His most recent publication is *Who Cares* (New York: Creative Time Books, 2006). His paintings have been included in *Sbarjah Biennial 10* (2011); *Abstract Possible*, Malmö Konsthall, Museo Tamayo, and Tensta Konsthall (2011–12); and dOCUMENTA 13 (2012).

Gregg Bordowitz is a New York-based writer and artist. He recently wrote and directed *The History of Sexuality Volume One by Michel Foucault: An Opera*, which premiered in 2010 in Vienna, Austria. He is author of two books: *General Idea: Imagevirus* (London: Afterall Books, 2010) and *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings 1986–2003* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2004), which received the 2006 Frank Jewett Mather Award from the College Art Association. His films include *Fast Trip Long Drop* (1993), *A Cloud In Trousers* (1995), *The Suicide* (1996), and *Habit* (2001). He is currently chair of the Film, Video, New Media, and Animation Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a member of the faculty in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program.

Moyra Davey is a New York-based artist. She has had solo exhibitions at Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts (*Long Life Cool White*, 2008), and Kunsthalle Basel (*SpeakerReceiver*, 2010). Her work was recently included in the exhibition *New Photography* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2011), and in the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2012).

Andrea Geyer is a New York-based artist. Recent works include *Comrades of Time*—a series of video vignettes—and *Criminal Case 40/61: Reverb*, a six-channel video engaging the historic trial of Adolf Eichmann. Her work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; REDCAT, Los Angeles; Tate Modern, London; Generali Foundation, Vienna; and Secession, Vienna. She participated in the São Paulo Biennial (2010) and documenta 12 (2007). She co-authored, with artist Sharon Hayes and curator Stina Edblom, the exhibition catalogue *History Is Ours* (Nuremberg: Kehrer Publisher, 2009), as well as two artist's books: *Audrey Munson, The Queen of the Artists' Studios* (New York: Art In General, 2007) and *Spiral Lands / Chapter 1* (London: Koenig Books, 2007).

Maria Gough teaches modern and contemporary art in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is author of *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Her articles on the history of abstraction, drawing, photography, exhibition design, para-architecture, and the relationship between aesthetics and politics have appeared in *October*, *New German Critique*, *Artforum*, *Modernism/modernity*, *RES: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics*, *Parkett*, and *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, and she has contributed to numerous exhibition catalogues.

Bill Horrigan is curator-at-large at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, where he founded the media art program in 1989. He has published widely on issues concerning the moving image and visual arts, and is co-author of the second volume of the *The Films of Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming). His exhibition *Josiah McElheny: Towards a Light Club* will be held at the Wexner Center in 2013.

JOSIAH McELHENY

SOME PICTURES OF THE INFINITE

CONTRIBUTIONS BY

DOUG ASHFORD

GREGG BORDOWITZ

MOYRA DAVEY

ANDREA GEYER

MARIA GOUGH

BILL HORRIGAN

ZOE LEONARD

HELEN MOLESWORTH

R. H. QUAYTMAN

TAYLOR WALSH