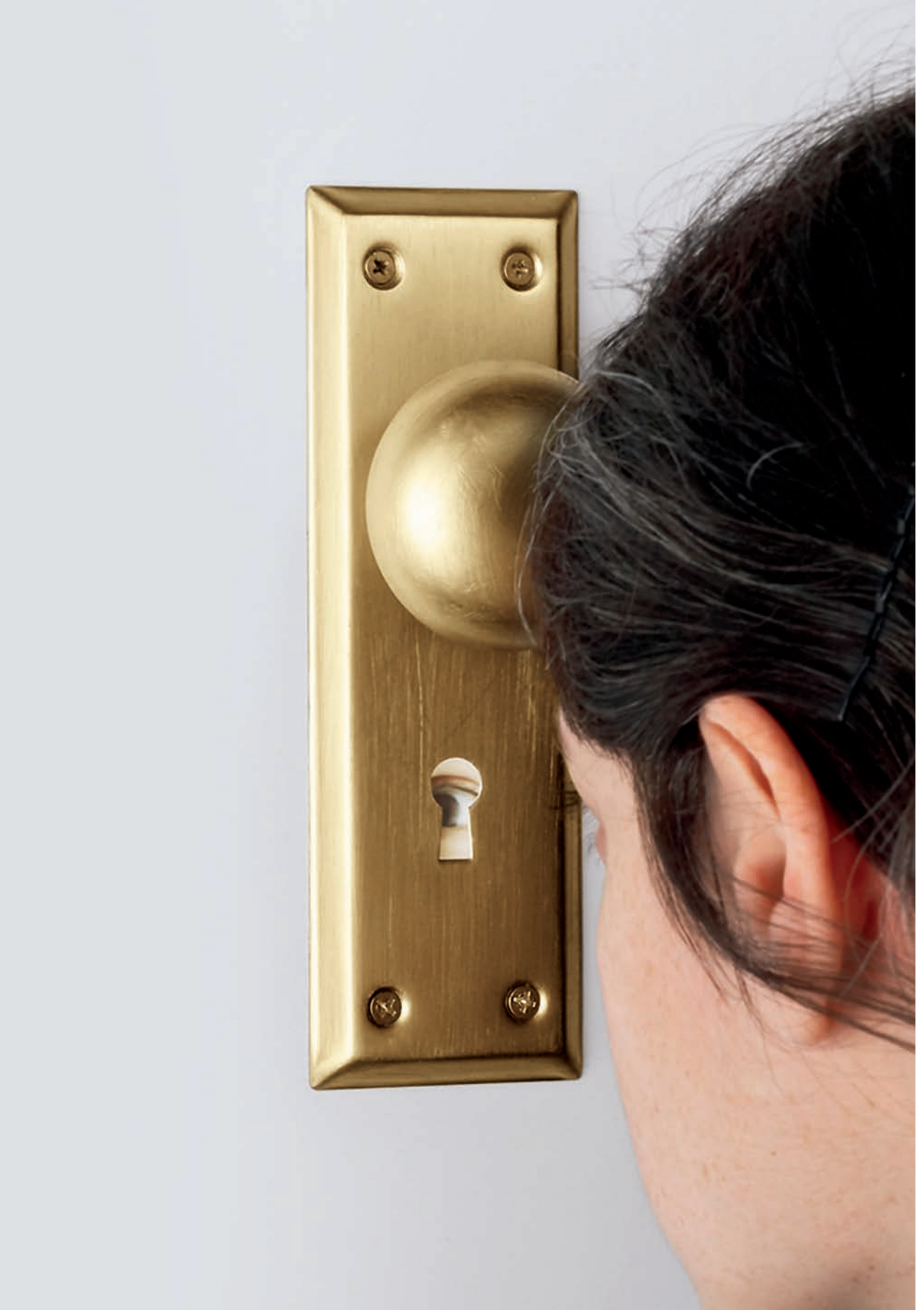

Jamie Isenstein : Will Return

Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery
Reed College, Portland, Oregon

Contents

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Empire of Fire (Fire Hose), 2010
Fire hose, hanger, hand or "Will Return" sign

Introduction

Stephanie Snyder

LET'S BEGIN WITH A PARADE OF NOISES: old-timey bicycle horns, creaking door hinges, carousel music (wobbling to a halt), and the tinny buzzing of wind-up toys. We know these sounds; they're part of us. Not because they're ubiquitous, but because they gripped us as children. We were charmed by them, and sometimes they scared us to death. Such sense memories evoke the floating worlds of entertainment and leisure: movies, amusement parks, penny arcades, magic shows, and scary movies – spaces in which we surrender ourselves to spectacle and illusion, suspend our disbelief and worry, and forge easy alliances with those around us. Marx famously denounced these spaces and their mass-produced tsotchkes as stupefying opiates. Yet artists have continually turned to the tender pleasures of the arcade, the effervescent bubbles of the amusement park and the cinema, and the most common artifacts of everyday life as portals, props, tools, and inspirations for rehabilitating society's wounded unconscious in the aftermath of horrific social traumas. I'm not talking about the darker aspects of the uncanny, but something else, something more mis-chevious and surprising – a playfully intellectual and flirtatious space of theatrical encounter replete with cross-dressing, pratfalls, and sleight of hand (tools of survival and assimilation) exemplified by the work of Marcel Duchamp and Meret Oppenheim, for instance, or for that matter, New York artist and Reed alumna Jamie Isenstein. I want to hold this vision aloft, savor its palpability and suspend a little contemporary cynicism as we consider Jamie Isenstein's work, in-depth, throughout this book, the artist's first comprehensive catalog, published fifteen years after she left her hometown of Portland, Oregon, and Reed College, for graduate school and life as an artist in New York City.

There aren't many works of art that compel you to laugh out loud or break into a smile, but Isenstein's do. They delight, amuse, and titillate. They do this individually – iconically even, as in the sacerdotal hand gestures of *Magic Fingers* – and collectively, in installations such as *This Way to the Egress* inspired by P. T. Barnum's infamous malapropism. Isenstein creates environmental tableau of conceptually related works that explore age-old existential questions, mass entertainments, common optical illusions, and various forms of wordplay. While these installations are often sparse, they conjure memories of historical spaces such as: old vaudeville stages (replete with red velvet curtains), Coney Island's Luna Park, nineteenth-

century curiosity museums, and humble corners in the Louvre. A given installation usually contains at least one work that accommodates Isenstein's own body. Or, one might say, a given installation contains at least one work that Isenstein's body is forced to contend with. The union of body and object in Isenstein's performative sculptures is a truly fascinating curiosity in and of itself. Sometimes Isenstein performs her work "back stage," cloaking herself near a work and activating it like a puppeteer or ventriloquist, as in *Invisible Disco Soft-shoe* in which she hides behind a set of red velvet theater curtains and manipulates their movements to the musical accompaniment of a player piano (chiming a ragtime adaptation of the Bee Gees' "Stayin' Alive"). At other times, Isenstein creates sculptures that enclose and conceal her, typically with the exception of an appendage jutting out of the work in order to, for example, hold a decorative life preserver or stand in for the arm of a chair. Invariably, the sculptures' human components feel like "fakes" in relationship to the materials around them. This is part of Isenstein's artistry. She's a good magician. When Isenstein inhabits her work, the unfolding of time slips into the presence of endurance, but it's impossible to tell whether this endurance is agonizing or enjoyable, or simply a welcome form of undistracted relaxation. Like a snail, Isenstein performs her labors of habitation hidden in the confines of a beautiful and carefully crafted domicile. For all we know, she could be napping.

As MIT anthropologist Graham Jones describes in his exquisite catalog essay, entertainment magic is predicated on an audience that knows it's being deceived and wants it. The better the deception, the more exhillirating the experience. We could say the same about mimesis. Isenstein's fluid destabilization of the *real* and the *artificial* speaks to Duchamp's discombobulation of artistic and aesthetic value, it "makes sensible," in Rancière's words, the magical thought and suspension of doubt that is the social, and perhaps, physiological reward of aesthetic experience. Unlike a "pure" Duchampian readymade lifted from the *Marché aux Puces*, Isenstein's hybridized chimeras wield a wicked irreverence toward the work of art as an object of singular legitimacy, in part, because much of their value is complicated by their extended relationship to her flesh. This topsy-turvy marriage of *object* and *body* catapults Isenstein's work into a very different place, than say, that of performance artist Marina Abramović, whose body is regularly isolated as a locus of surplus value and imbued with an iconic status – a precursor to its artistic apotheosis. In contrast, Isenstein's inhabited works are earthbound by the idiosyncrasies of her corpus.

While it would be incorrect to say that Isenstein is preoccupied with binaries, there is a powerful kind of "on/off" mechanism at play in her work: mortality/immortality; the human body/the human corpse (or skeleton); authenticity (trust)/

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Inside Out Winter Hat Dance, 2005
900 lbs of ice, top hat
Installation view
The Wrong Gallery, New York

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Inside Out Winter Hat Dance, 2005
900 lbs of ice (partially melted), top hat
Installation view
The Wrong Gallery, New York

deception (betrayal). In the sculpture *Clap Magic* a household reading lamp is turned off and on by the sound of the artist's hands clapping – displayed on video. The work is a hilarious mash-up of high and low; here Isenstein deploys one of the most banal objects ever sold via TV commercial to comment on one of video art's earliest subjects – the repetitive motion of the human body.

Isenstein's deliciously willful "charlatanism" deserves consideration in relationship to Russian linguist Mikhail Bahktin's notion of the "carnivalesque," the ritualized chaotic inversion of established social and religious norms prevalent during the Middle Ages. Victor Hugo famously illustrated this in his depiction of the medieval King of Fools celebration in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. When the deformed bell-ringer Quasimoto is crowned "king," he becomes an absurd stand-in or prop for the monarch and is then raucously mocked and ridiculed by the public. It's not far from the self-deprecation in Jewish humor, such a huge part of vaudeville and slapstick. (The tradition is alive and well in the comedy of Larry David and Louis C.K.) Isenstein brings her own kind of carnivalesque irreverence to Western art's most somber and poignant concerns, drawing them out like venom from a snake bite and placing them on center stage for our collective delight. If you're not laughing, you're crying – so goes the logic of Jewish humor. The day when Isenstein's messianic "Will Return" sign is rendered null and void by her death will only complicate the issue.

Stephanie Snyder
John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director,
Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery

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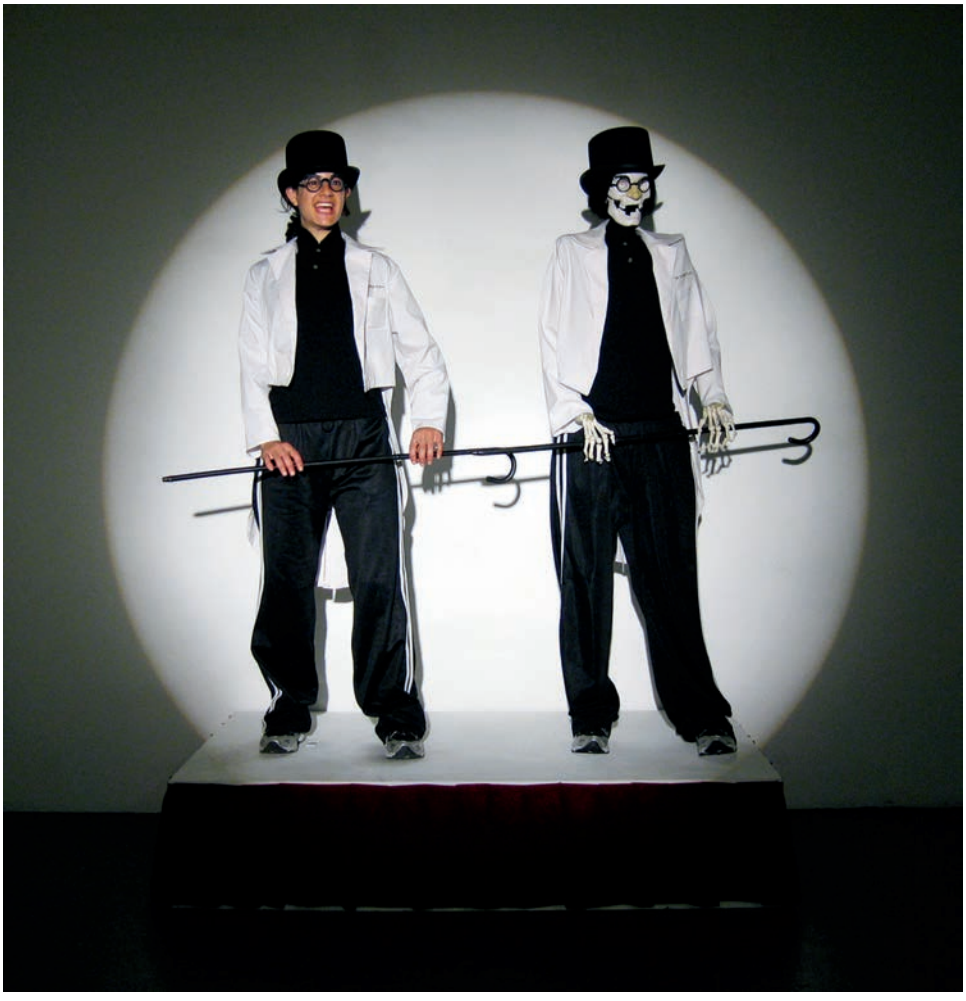
Jamie Isenstein : Will Return
Works in the Exhibition

August 27 – October 20, 2013
Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery
Reed College, Portland, Oregon

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Infinite Disco Soft-shoe, 2002–2004
Single-channel video on CRT monitor
Dimensions variable



JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Magic Fingers, 2003
Gilded picture frame, picture light, plastic hemisphere, human hand or "Will Return" sign
Dimensions variable

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Magic Fingers, 2003
Gilded picture frame, picture light, plastic hemisphere, human hand or "Will Return" sign
Dimensions variable


WILL RETURN
12
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Inside Out Headshots (Skeleton and Lotion), 2004
Pen and lotion on black and white photographs
Diptych, 10.5 x 8.5 in. each


25% MORE FREE
Suave
Skin Therapy
LOTION

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Eyehole, 2005
Brass, copper, plastic, enamel, acrylic, cardboard, glass mirror
8.5 x 2.5 x 3 in.

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Eyehole, 2005
Brass, copper, plastic, enamel, acrylic, cardboard, glass mirror
8.5 x 2.5 x 3 in.

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Acéphal Magical, 2007
Two-channel video projection
Dimensions variable

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Clap Magic, 2007
CRT monitor, "The Clapper,"™ single-channel video, custom-made lamp, shade
Dimensions variable

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Clap Magic, 2007
CRT monitor, "The Clapper,"™ single-channel video, custom-made lamp, shade
Dimensions variable

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Snuffer, 2008
C-print
19 x 24 in.

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Magic Jacket, 2009
Tailcoat, coat rack, hanger, appearing flowers, two foam balls, thumb tip, two silks, rope, two decks of cards, matches, Devil's Handkerchief, handkerchief, one dollar bill, two balloons, watch, bottle top, two coins, wand
66.5 x 17.5 x 13.5 in.

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Waxworks, 2009
C-print
30 x 40 in.

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Dancing Pop-up Fishing Sculpture, 2010
Fabric, glue, paint, "Worm in a Can" gag dinner mints, pillow stuffing, human leg, fishnet tights, tap shoe, human arm, "Wishin' I Was Fishin'" or "Gone Fishing" life preservers, pedestal
Dimensions variable


Wishin'
I was
Fishin'

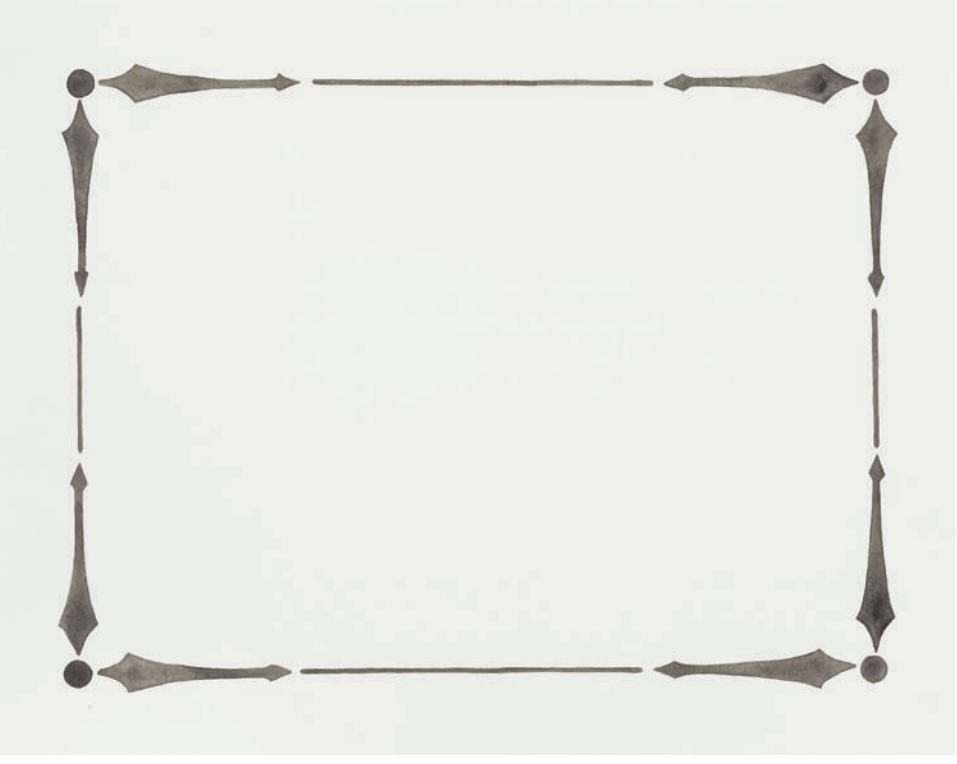
JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Dancing Pop-up Fishing Sculpture, 2010
Fabric, glue, paint, "Worm in a Can" gag dinner mints, pillow stuffing, human leg, fishnet tights, tap shoe, human arm, "Wishin' I Was Fishin'" or "Gone Fishing" life preservers, pedestal
Dimensions variable


Gone
Fishing

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Delicious After Dinner Mints, 2010
C-print
19 x 14.5 in.

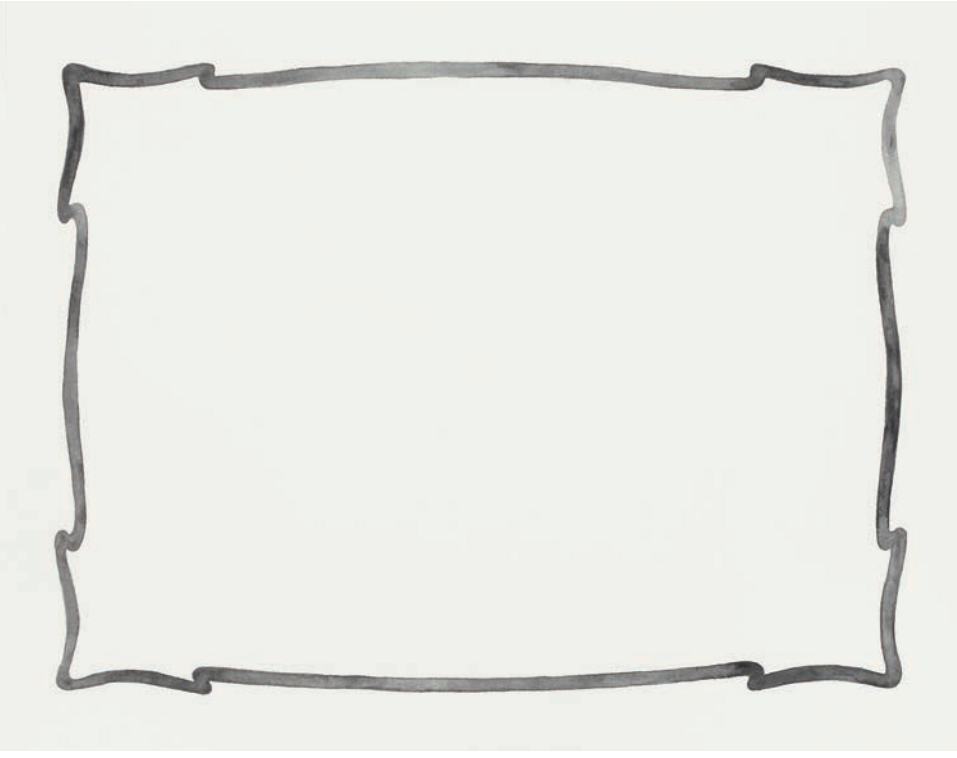

Delicious
AFTER DINNER
MINTS

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Inside Outside Backstage Vase, 2011
Natural and artificial flowers, ceramic vase, water
Dimensions variable



JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Untitled (Silent film inter-title border with arrows), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper
11 x 14 in.

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Untitled (Silent film inter-title border with curves), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper
11 x 14 in.



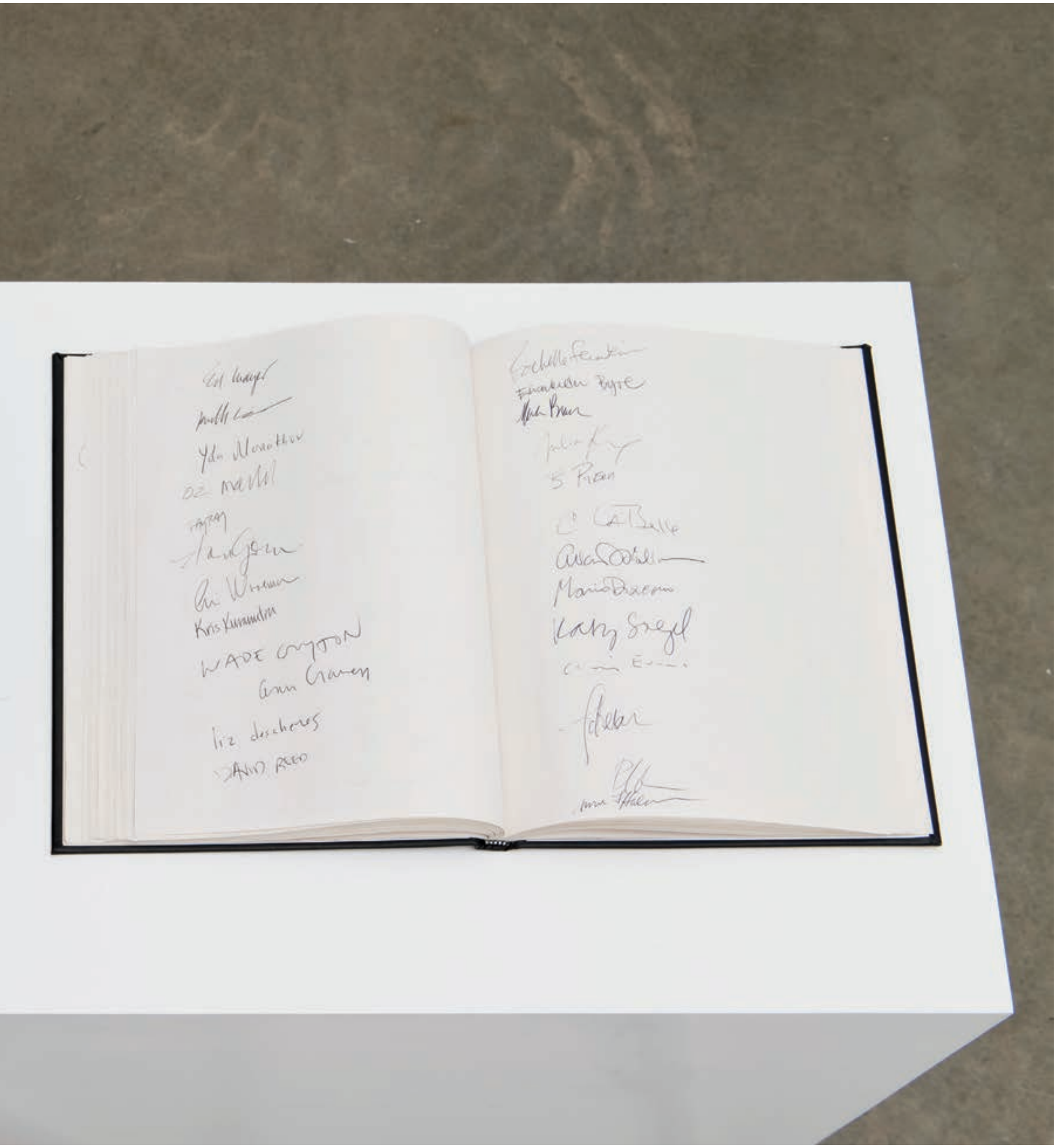
JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Intermission Sign, 2013
Brass easel, stretched canvas, acrylic
59 x 37 x 23 in.


INTERMISSION

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Untitled (Ear plug and ear), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper
Diptych, (left to right) 12 x 16 in., 14 x 11 in.

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Rug Woogie X, 2013
(Pictured: **Rug Woogie II**, 2010)
Performance on harp with yarn

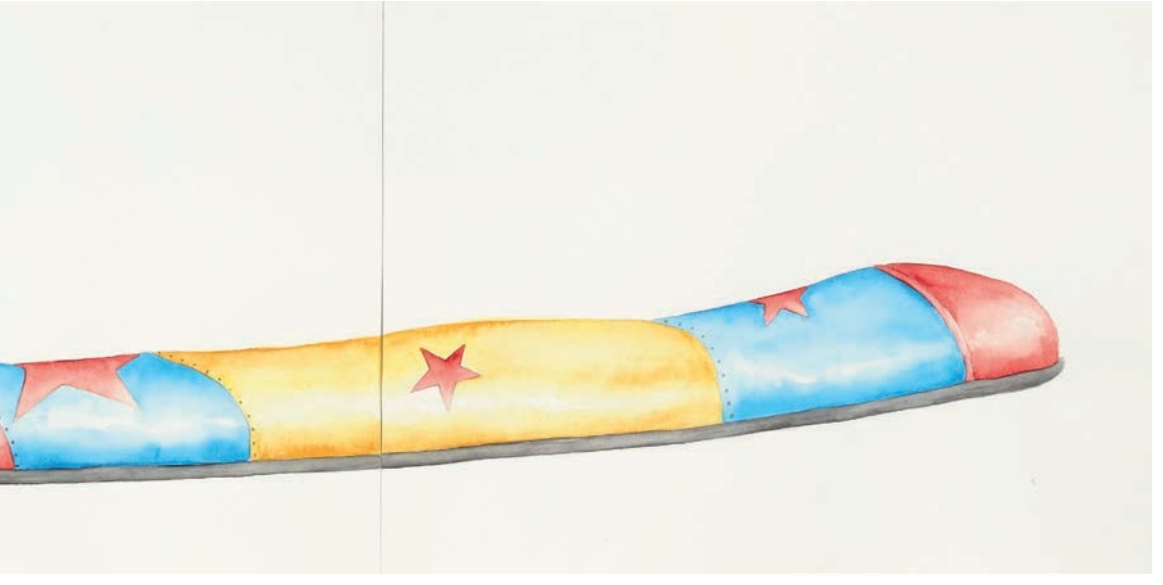
JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Book of the Dead, 2013
(Pictured: **Book of the Dead**, 2005–2010)
Guest book, gold paint, leather
11 x 8.5 x .5 in., closed


WADE GUYTON
Katy Siegel
DAVID REED

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Untitled (Yellow, turquoise, red clown shoe), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper
Triptych, 12 x 16 in. each

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Untitled (Purple boot clown shoe), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper
Diptych, 12 x 16 in. each

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Untitled (Green, blue, red polka dot clown shoe with kiltie), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper
12 x 16 in.



Slower than the Eye: Time, Artifice, and Concealment's Revelations

Graham M. Jones

ARTIST UNKNOWN
Edm. Renk Kortkunstner, ca.1915
Stone Lithograph

Slower than the Eye: Time, Artifice, and Concealment's Revelations

Graham M. Jones

A person was half hidden who had learned to know the uncanny hiding-place, where he discovered things hidden to others.
—Daniel Merkur, *Becoming Half Hidden*

HUMAN STATUARY, MAGIC ACTS, SIDESHOW CURIOSITIES, automata, escape artistry … From vaudeville to the dime museum, Jamie Isenstein recalls and reanimates the world of spectacular sensations that took shape with the advent of urban mass culture. In the nineteenth century, novel modes of performance, exhibition, and publicity developed in relation to new spectating publics eager for marvelous diversions, which often involved displays of embodied dexterity, prowess, or endurance.[1] In her evocation of these variety acts and exhibitionistic attractions, Isenstein uses a vocabulary of uncanny gesture and the spectacular but half-hidden body to raise questions about leisure, labor, commodification, and the nature of art.

I approach her work from the somewhat unusual vantage point of a cultural anthropologist who has made extensive ethnographic study of a particular genre of variety act: entertainment magic. For more than a year and a half, I conducted participant observation fieldwork among magicians in Paris, France, documenting how they produce, circulate, and display secret skills in the context of clubs and magic shops where they congregate, and theaters, cabarets, festive events, and street corners where they perform.[2] An overarching preoccupation with the shifting cultural significance – and insignificance – of magic therefore informs the perspective I take here.

I have long been intrigued by Isenstein's sustained engagement with the aesthetics of not only magic, but also what cultural historian Simon During calls the *magic assemblage*, "a loose cluster of entertainment attractions based on effects, tricks, dexterities, and illusions" that reached its apogee in Europe and the United States (my primary frames of reference here) around the turn of the previous century.[3] A diverse range of contemporary artists draws inspiration from this evocative, iconographically rich tradition; the 2009 Hayward touring exhibition *Magic Show*, organized in collaboration with QUAD (Derby, UK) and curated by Jonathan Allen and Sally O'Reilly, featured twenty-four artists with broad – or for those like Allen himself, Janice Kerbel,

1. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*.
2. Jones, *Trade of the Tricks*.
3. During, *Modern Enchantments*, 215.

or Annika Lundgren, very direct – connections to magic.[4] In Isenstein's work, magical motifs prove a particularly generative resource for addressing dynamics of artifice central to art-making, commenting on the arbitrariness of distinctions between high and low culture, and refracting the embodied – and perhaps more important, *entimed* – experience of the artist as cultural producer.

☛ ☚

TO BEGIN TO ILLUMINATE Isenstein's resignification of magical motifs, I turn to Roland Barthes's provocative remarks on the semiotics of variety acts. For Barthes, "Variety acts aren't just a simple form of entertainment, but rather a condition of artifice" in which gesture is "freed from the sweetish pulp of time, presented in a superlative state, endowed with the character of pure visuality, disconnected from causality" and elaborated in relationship to the glittery paraphernalia that define the vaudevillian aesthetic. Barthes hints that these urban entertainments respond to the dehumanizing experience of industrial labor: magicians who "gobble up paper, silk, and cigarettes," like other variety artists, represent "the aesthetic form of work" or "human labor memorialized and sublimated," transformed into a "profound fantasy that erases all brutality from labor, leaving nothing but its purified essence."[5]

Isenstein's *Magic Fingers* (2003), also a work of gesture presented in a purified form, interrogates these intertwined themes of artifice and labor. In this piece, the viewer encounters what at first appears to be a startlingly lifelike sculpture of a hand displayed in a recessed oval niche, illuminated from above by a gallery lamp. Prolonged observation reveals that the hand is, in fact, attached to a body – the artist's – ensconced in the wall, and that it periodically changes positions, enacting prototypical gestures from the history of art. This piece evokes the uncanny and often erotically charged attraction of living statuary and *tableaux vivants* in the nineteenth-century magic assemblage[6] – and indeed, their ongoing cultural relevance as entertainments in an era of the posthuman and virtualized body.[7] At the same time, it speaks to the cultural elaboration surrounding the virtuosity and expressivity of the hand in both art and magic – indeed, Isenstein informs me that, in her original conception, she would have performed sleight-of-hand manipulations rather than art-historical gestures.

The iconicity of the artist's hand as a locus of skill and the elaboration of painted and sculpted representations of hands have been closely connected in Western art since the Renaissance.[8] Isenstein embellishes this symbolic nexus by exhibiting her own isolated hand as both a metonym for the artist as maker of images and as itself a

4. Allen and O'Reilly, eds., *Magic Show*.
5. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 176–179.
6. Assael, "Art or Indecency?"
7. Lavender, "The Living Statue."
8. Barolsky, "The Artist's Hand."

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Magic Fingers, 2003
Gilded picture frame, picture light, plastic hemisphere, human hand or "Will Return" sign

medium of mimesis – as well as, perhaps, a mediator of artistic influence. Magic acts similarly celebrate the hand as both an icon of agency and a medium of performance. Jean Cocteau, for instance, exalted magicians as "men of a thousand hands," evoking the recognizably human but mystifying prodigious dexterity they embody.[9]

I began to think about the explicit and implicit parallelisms between Isenstein's work and magic by reading *Magic Fingers* alongside another bold proclamation of the significance of the hand: a stunningly complementary 1905 poster advertising the "Queen of Coins," Mercedes Talma. The image of an upwardly reaching female hand – "the most dextrous hand in the world" – with a billowing ruffled sleeve alludes to Talma's hallmark performance of coin manipulations, and particularly her rendition of a classic trick called "The Miser's Dream" in which she appeared to pluck coin after coin from out of thin air.

The rise of music-hall and vaudeville shows made up of short, modular acts encouraged magicians to develop sensational specialties; manipulation acts show-

9. Cocteau, Untitled poem [1953].

casing astonishing manual virtuosity were particularly in vogue, and had the added virtue of enabling quick scene changes since they mainly involved props carried on the conjurer's person.[10] Talma was doubly distinctive as both a female headliner in a genre dominated by men and masculine imagery, and as a female conjurer emphasizing virtuosic skill. According to convention, the dramatizing or downplaying of skill in magic functions as a diacritical sign in a system of gendered self-presentation that links technical expertise with masculinity.[11]

Contemporary reviewers praised Talma's feminine qualities while marveling at the seeming incongruity of hands both delicate and dexterous. Describing Talma's production of a coin "between her dainty finger and thumb" after showing both sides of her hand empty, one reviewer found the illusion "so complete as to appear magical, and the 'palming' is done with such astonishing expertness that the most earnest attention would fail to detect the *modus operandi* unless the spectator were previously acquainted with it. Talma is certainly a 'wonder' in her way, and, besides being enormously adroit, is pretty, attractive, and amusing."[12]

Highlighting inscrutable artifice as both the medium and message of Talma's performance, the reviewer reminds us that modern magic commingles pleasures of voluntary deception and skeptical scrutiny, productively blending enchantment and disenchantment. As in biographies of artists,[13] (largely apocryphal) stories abound of magicians so skillful that their performances are mistaken for reality: one author relays that after Talma simulated extracting coins from the vestments and beard of an indigenous South African, his companions, taking the performance too literally, "nearly dragged him to pieces hunting for his mysterious wealth."[14] The Africans in this set piece are foils for culturally competent – presumably European – spectators, with the appropriately self-reflexive stance toward magical wonders.[15] According to the conventions of modern magic, performers must be accountable to *delight but not delude*,[16] and audiences must be willing to be deceived but not be so credulous that they mistake illusions for reality.

In its heyday, the magic assemblage persistently challenged the public's competence as consumers of epistemologically ambiguous attractions. Historian James Cook situates P. T. Barnum's famous humbuggery within this wider constellation of "artful deceptions" that provided "a mechanism for individual and social differentiation" for nineteenth-century Americans and Europeans, "an engaging assortment of cultural deceits with which an eager public" could gauge "its moral and aesthetic thresholds."[17]

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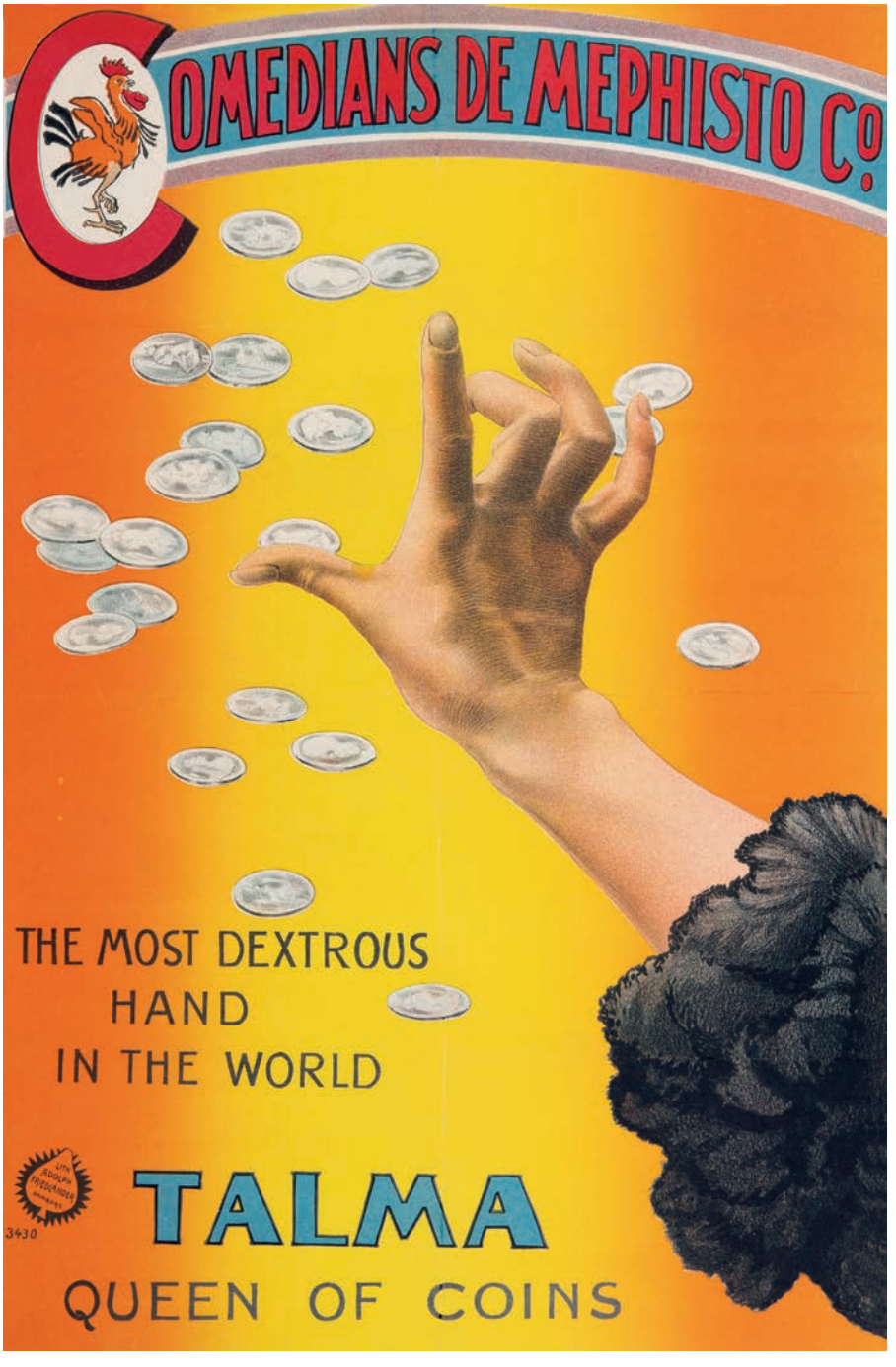
10. Solomon, "Up-to-Date Magic."
11. Jones, *Trade of the Tricks*, 129–131.
12. "Music Hall Gossip," *The Era*, August 26, 1899.
13. Kris and Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic*.
14. "A Lady Conjurer," *The Mercury*, February 9, 1900.
15. Jones, "Modern Magic," 68.
16. Saler, "Modernity and Enchantment," 713.
17. Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, 259–260.



ARTIST UNKNOWN
Talma, Queen of Coins, ca.1905
Stone lithograph

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
This Way to the Egress, 2007
Installation view
The Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

In *This Way to the Egress* (2007), Isenstein draws explicitly on one of Barnum's most duplicitous contrivances – a sign in his American Museum directing visitors to what appeared to be an exhibit, but which was in fact a one-way exit onto the street. Barnum used the Latinate term "egress" as a shibboleth to sort spectators into rubes fit to be fleeced and savvy cultural consumers in on the joke. Isenstein envisions a rare bird as the referent to this rare word, but her fine-feathered Egress is a reminder that works of art also sort people through the mechanism of taste, requiring self-reflexive competencies often misrecognized as innate, and serving as a quintessential basis for social distinction.[18] This is a characteristic move in her repertoire: casting a sharply critical perspective on the conventions of art through the re-presentation of "artful deceptions," while also generously fulfilling – and even expanding – the promise of pure enjoyment present in these sources.

18. Bourdieu, "Historical Genesis."

PARADOXICALLY, a work like *Magic Fingers*, which seems to hinge so inexorably on the artist's embodied presence, only comes into the fullness of meaning precisely when she is absent, through Isenstein's ingenious use of a ready-made "Will Return" sign. On a practical level, the sign solves a thorny problem of alienability: how can a performance work that requires the embodied presence of an artist circulate as a cultural commodity independent of her body? By always promising to return – rather than circulating her performances as mediated representations or interpretations by other performers – she frees the staging elements from her body, but also makes them *inalienable*, reinforcing the value of the viewer's actual or potential co-presence with the person of the artist.[19]

The little plastic sign fundamentally reframes the nature of Isenstein's performances, particularly in respect to the condition of time. Reviewers for publications from the *New York Times*[20] to *Art in America*[21] have repeatedly classified Isenstein as an "endurance artist." Without a doubt, she endures uncommon privations, confinements and contortions in her performances. Yet, as she pointed out to me in conversation, "The 'Will Return' sign prevents me from being an endurance artist. It's not about stretching bodily ability. It's more like a *job* if you consider a job an endurance performance." This is not the relentless assembly-line drudgery of Tehching Hsieh's *Time Clock Piece* (1980–81) – in which the artist punched in every hour for a year – or the record-setting chronometric stunts of magician David Blaine (who incidentally assumes the mantle of "endurance artist"). It's the forgiving temporality of a mom-and-pop shop.

Isenstein's reference to the profane time of work belies modernist conceptions of the artist's sacred role as not a producer of leisure commodities destined for conspicuous consumption, but rather a cultural prophet. This vision of the artist-function took shape amid a broader reimagining of labor and leisure time as manifestations of social class, which saw novel recreational practices emerge as predominant identity markers. T. J. Clark famously observes, "Modernist art is characterized … by its desire to take its distance from the petite bourgeoisie and the world of entertainments it ushered in, but artists were paradoxically fascinated by those entertainments and made them the new art's central subject for a considerable time."[22] If music-hall attractions were the "aesthetic form of work" in Barthes's formulation, then Impressionists' distantiated depictions of popular culture produced an alternative condition of artifice I would be tempted to call the "aesthetic form of leisure."

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19. Weiner, "Inalienable Wealth."
20. Smith, "Thomas Palme," *New York Times*, September 17, 2004.
21. Amy, "Jamie Isenstein."
22. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 202.

As the ultimate prestige commodity, the exquisitely refined leisure of art could claim spiritual transcendence only through the mystification of the conditions of its own production.[23] Isenstein calls attention to these mystifications, bringing marginalized marvels center-stage and exposing the fetish quality of art objects. What better illustration of Marx's stupendous prosopopoeic vision of furniture coming to life and evolving grotesque ideas could there be than her *Arm Chair* (2006)?[24] Signaling that art too is just a job, she here both confounds and compounds the fetishizing impulse by creating a commodity that is literally incomplete – a more apposite term for a fetish might be *vacant* – without the magical labor of her continuously inhabiting body.

In fact, a work like *Arm Chair* may not be a *performance* at all, but rather an *animation*, a breathing into of life. Teri Silvio provocatively argues that "animation has the same potential as a structuring trope in the age of digital media and the rise of the creative industries that performance had in the age of broadcast media and the rise of the service industry."[25] In this way, Isenstein's self-effacing form of self-display (usually faceless and mostly hidden from view) may speak to the sensibility of an American generation that regards selfhood as inviolable but also inaccessible, save through the increasingly entwined mediations of digital communications and the cultural marketplace.

FOR BARTHES, the resplendent virtuosity of vaudevillian performers – magicians and others – was a "sublimation" of labor in the context of industrial capitalism. What kind of *work* is magic in a postindustrial setting of outsourced, automated, and deskilled labor, of "knowledge economies" and disembodied networks? Contemporary performances, particularly by close-up magicians, seem to reassert the cultural value of physical difficulty and embodied interaction.[26] Isenstein's nostalgic allusions to the magic assemblage have a similar valence, but they also double back to the historical conditions that gave rise, coevally, to modern art. Since the category of art is culturally constructed as the contemplative alternative to purely functional craft and merely pleasurable entertainment, Isenstein's critical examination of the conditions of art-making is most trenchant when she mobilizes the imagery of these repressed but co-constitutive Others.[27]

In the tour-de-force installation *Acéphal Magical* (2007), Isenstein evokes probably the greatest sensation in the history of magical entertainments. Effects of decapitation and dismemberment have a long legacy in Western and non-Western

23. Bourdieu, "Historical Genesis," 204.
24. Marx, *Capital*, 82.
25. Silvio, "Animation: The New Performance?," 422.
26. Jones, *Trade of the Tricks*, 239–240.
27. Becker, *Art Worlds*, 298–299.

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Arm Chair, 2006
Wood, metal, nylon, raw cotton, linen, jeans, shoes, hardware,
human arms, human legs or "Will Return" sign

ARTIST UNKNOWN
Adelaide Herrmann Hindoo Magic,
ca.1900, Stone lithograph

performance – Reginald Scot gave illustrated instructions for the "decollation of John the Baptist" in his 1584 *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, for instance – and they retained currency in the modern magic assemblage, including performances by other headlining female magicians, such as Adelaide Herrmann.

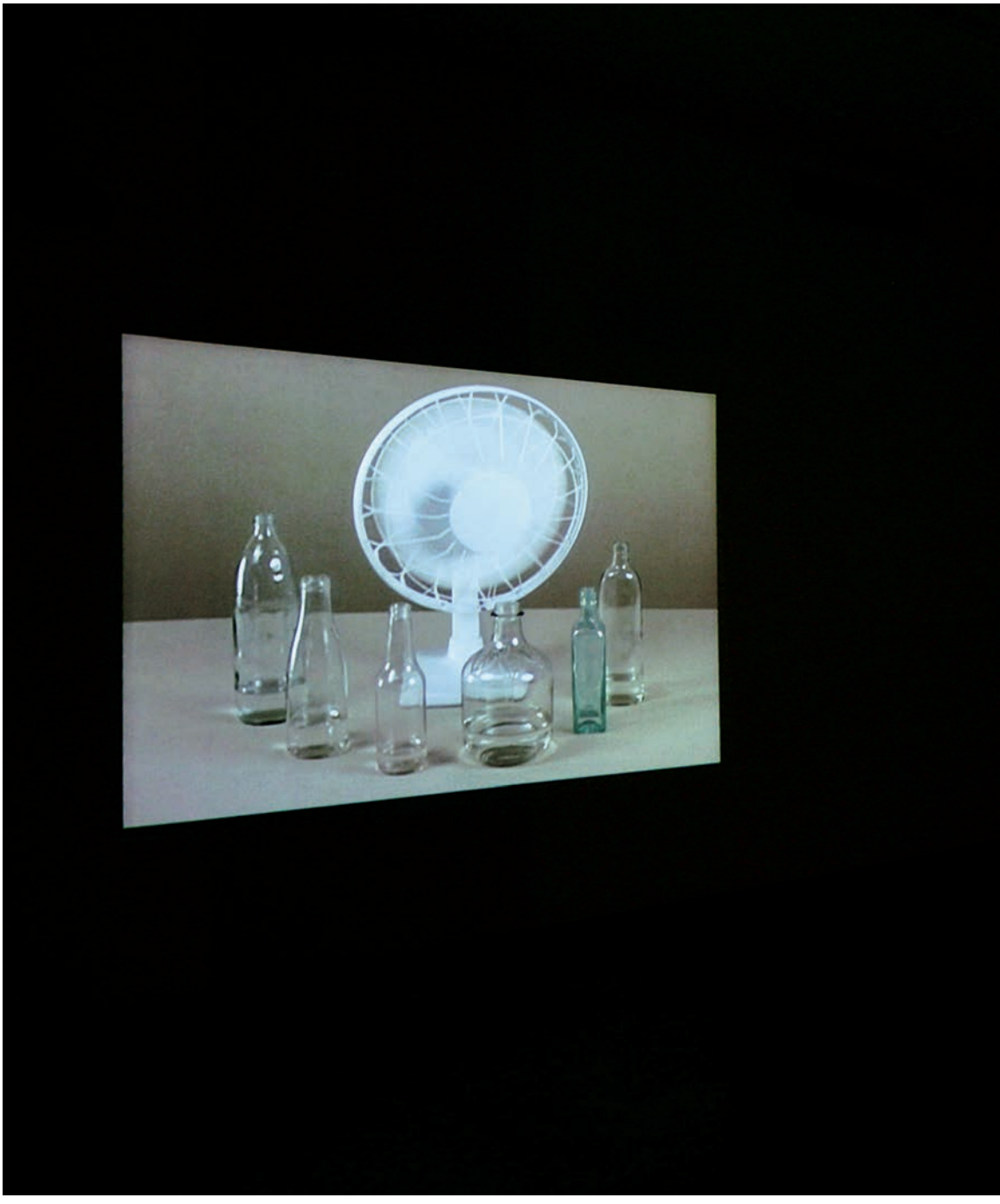
Isenstein conflates effects of decapitation with the blockbuster "Sawing a Lady in Half," an effect originated in 1920 and endlessly staged for decades to come in countless permutations – with or without box, using handsaw or buzz saw, bloodless or gory, etc.[28] Typifying the gravitas of the modern magician, the high-tech wizardry of turn-of-the-century grand illusion, and the symbolic subordination of a sexualized female assistant (to say nothing of its mythopoeic imagery of death and rebirth), no effect is more iconic – or clichéd.

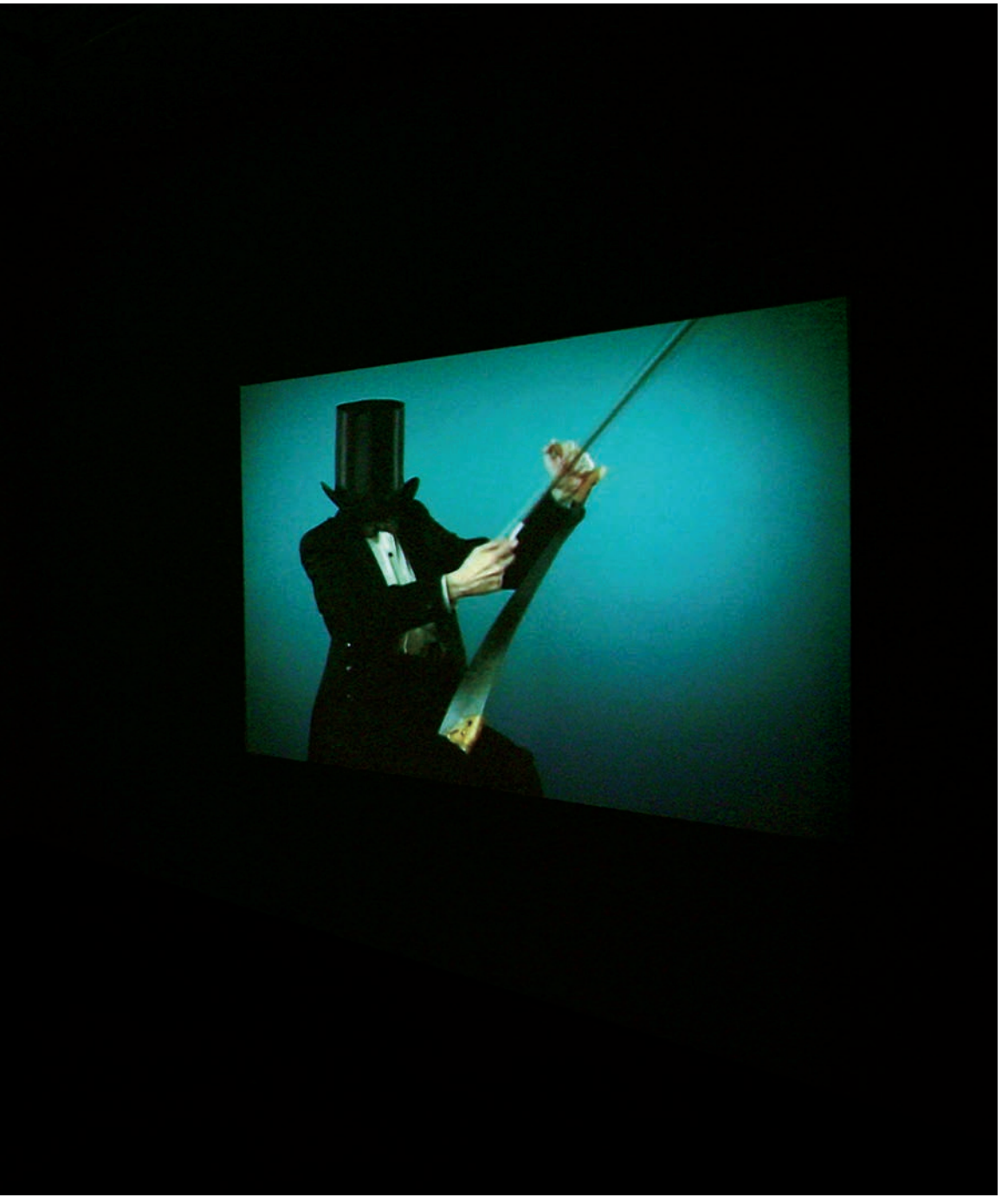
Isenstein's rendition is an oneiric tableau with an assistant displayed in a state of suspended decapitation. From one end of an elevated long blue box protrude two living feet (the artist's) clad in men's patent leather dress shoes; at the other end, a segment ostensibly containing the head has been detached, and sits off at an angle. (In a particularly macabre twist, when the artist is absent, the "Will Return" sign hangs on the larger segment of the box, opened to reveal that the body is gone – whether or not her head remains in the closed smaller segment is left unknown.) Meanwhile, in an accompanying video projection, a tuxedoed magician, head replaced by a top hat, plays a saw with a bow – transforming the implement of violence into an instrument of music, but in the process seeming to abdicate control of the performance, leaving the act itself headless and stalled.

This mise-en-scène highlights subtexts of gender and labor implicit in the source performance. Initial presentations of "The Sawing" in the 1920s explicitly referenced fears of female overreaching attendant upon women's suffrage,[29] and the effect fit into an already established pattern of misogynistic imagery in magic.[30] Just as Western art has historically foregrounded the male artist's access to the eroticized female labor of models, in the conventional gender arrangement of stage magic, entranced female assistants are passive recipients of male magicians' displays of potency, agency, and expertise.

"Traditional stage magic divides its performers into (male) capital and (female) labor," writes Francesca Coppa, "and exaggerates that distinction so that male magicians are defined by their role as possessors of restricted magical knowledge, whereas female assistants … are depicted within the magic act as hypnotized, asleep, unconscious, or mentally vacant."[31] In reality, when magicians appear to vanish or vivisect an assistant, the person inside the glittery box performs much of the illusion's skilled labor, while only appearing to remain passive. In a trick like "The Sawing," explains

28. Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant*, 277–295.
29. Ibid., 292–293.
30. Beckman, *Vanishing Women*.
31. Coppa, "The Body Immaterial," 86–87.





JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Acéphal Magical, 2007
Two-channel video projection
Installation view, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Saw the Lady, 2007
Wood, sheet-metal, copper hardware, human body and patent leather tuxedo shoes or head and "Will Return" sign

Coppa, "the display of power is such that the weak (female) assistant cannot even be imagined as laboring. The narrative of weakness and passivity is essential to the trick," because "the woman's talent and effort is part of the secret, part of the magician's misdirection."[32]

Isenstein inhabits (or animates) the subject position of a beheaded assistant, whose labor is hidden not only for the sake of illusion but also in the service of normative gender ideology. With time interrupted in the middle of the trick, the spectator is drawn into the protracted work of the woman in the box (in some variant illusions, spectators were indeed allowed onstage to inspect the box and even given the option of paying an additional fee to peek inside to see how the assistant had folded herself to avoid getting cut).[33] Still I hesitate to read *Acéphal Magical* as a straightforward comment on female subjugation. As the artist, Isenstein is also aligned with the role of the magician, nominal architect and agent of the effect. Unlike the prototypically self-aggrandizing male magician standing center stage, arms wide to receive accolades for the illusion, the magician figure in this installation is faceless, seated, and distracted by the sad beauty of another performance. Moreover, the magician and assistant are both androgynous here, and in some ways seem interchangeable doubles, alter egos, less super- and subordinate than co-participants in a mutual condition of acephaly.

In addition to these central figures, perhaps non-communicating versions of the same fractured self, a small cast of automata complete this melancholic scene. The magician's musical saw harmonizes with the melody created by the breeze of a rotating fan – a kind of surrogate head – blowing notes on the mouths of water-filled bottles in a second projection. In another part of the installation, a video of clapping hands playing on a TV set turns a lamp rigged with a Clapper™ sound-activated switch repeatedly on and off. Is this a surrogate for an absent audience or rather another feat of self-generating magic? The proliferation of automata here speaks to the centrality of marvelous mechanisms of simulated life in the magic assemblage, but also emblematizes the loneliness and decadent solipsism of a self-contained world.[34]

In Dante's *Inferno*, headlessness is the exemplary form of *contrapasso* – counter-punishment resembling the crime – making physically literal, legible on the body, the sin of causing division.[35] The Dante-esque *Acéphal* also addresses the causes and consequences of division, though Isenstein's questions seem more conceptual than socio-political: how does the range of binary divisions manifest here – mind/body, subject/object, masculine/feminine, labor/leisure – organize human experience and structure the artist's expressive activity? Does the persistence of these oppositions inflict a kind of metaphysical violence? Most important for my purposes, her appropriation of magic calls into question an equally divisive binary: art/entertainment.

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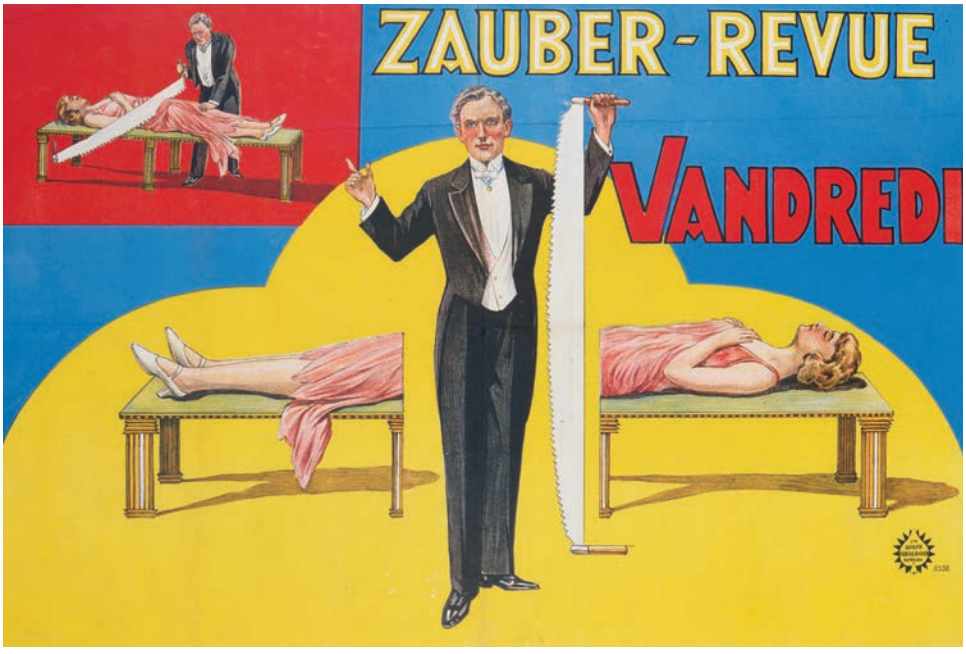
32. Ibid., 94.
33. Nickell, *Secrets of the Sideshows*, 272–274.
34. Metzner, *Crescendo of the Virtuoso*, 160–210.
35. Alighieri, *Inferno* XXVIII, 118-142.



Using entertainment allegorically to comment on art, Isenstein probes how these categories are historically interrelated in the production of cultural value. Among entertainments, magic has a reputation of especially acute triviality arising from an emphasis on manual dexterity as opposed to ideational content, the centrality of trickery based on the concealment of technical secrets, and a seemingly unshakeable aura of anachronistic kitsch.[36] Recontextualizing magic within the distinguishing sphere of art, Isenstein compels a closer look at the latent symbolic charge of its characteristic marvels.[37] In so doing, she suggests an illuminating analogy between two distinctively modern genres that both generate interest through the dialectical interplay of enchantment and disenchantment, mystification and demystification.

IF I BEGAN WITH THE ARTIST'S HANDS, I end with her feet. Unlike nobler members, the feet are not objects of exceptional elaboration in either art or magic, though their expressive potential is far from negligible. In grand illusions such as "The Sawing," the extremities that protrude from a box are crucial to the illusion as signifiers

36. During, *Modern Enchantments*, 2.

37. For a discussion of magicians making parallel appropriations from fine art, see Jones, *Trade of the Tricks*, 225–231.

ARTIST UNKNOWN
Vandredi Zauber-Revue, ca.1931
Stone lithograph

ARTIST UNKNOWN
Marbrus présente une terrifiante attraction?, ca.1930
Stone lithograph

of the vitality and continuity of the body even as it is divided into pieces. In *Acéphal Magical*, Isenstein's pedalian reference to the role of the assistant also inconspicuously intimates the living presence of the artist in the work.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett discusses objects as "slow events."[38] In works like *Acéphal* and *Magic Fingers*, the slower-than-the-eye quality of Isenstein's gestures – an inversion of the quicker-than-the-eye mythology of magic – converges on the conditions of objecthood, magnifying the fusion of her body with the materiality of the artwork.

Immobility is just one of the many forms of hiddenness she explores both literally, through mechanisms of partial and total concealment, and conceptually, through the games she plays with space and time – in *Escape Artist's Luggage* (2005), she performs a magical feat of *evasion* through the topological transformation of *eversion*; in *Will Return* (2005), a running clock set fifteen minutes in advance permanently defers her promised reappearance.

The artist's feet jutting from the box in *Acéphal* typify the kinds of intimations of hiddenness that echo through her oeuvre. Perhaps in this more than anything, Isenstein operates with the sensibility of a magician. Magic hinges on what Simmel calls the "fascination of secrecy" that leads us to "intensify the unknown through imagi-

38. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "World Heritage," 180.

nation."[39] Whether performing sleight-of-hand manipulations or big-box illusions, magicians display possession of hidden knowledge and skill, provoking both curiosity and desire. These are just the sentiments titillated by Isenstein's kinky *Magic Jacket* (2009), a performance-ready magician's dress coat replete with props, secret "loads," and gimmicked pockets, left negligently hanging and encountered as if unawares.

Like magic tricks, some of Isenstein's performances involve technical conundrums, and even if she is not strictly speaking an endurance artist, her feats of claustrophobic confinement and ascetic motionlessness provoke a kind of awe (fakirs too were magic assemblage mainstays).[40] Still, the bulk of Isenstein's work is less about secrets in the magician's sense of coveted technical know-how than about the intriguing mystery of half-hidden beings and bodies, of deferred visual gratification and obstructed interaction. She makes this hiding a means of discovery, even a mode of inquiry. The living appendages that reveal her concealment in the entrails of gallery walls, magician's boxes, or everyday objects convey the return of something repressed into the immaculate space of art. Could it be magic?

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39. Simmel, *Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 332–3.

40. Jones, "Modern Magic," 86–89.

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Escape Artist's Luggage, 2005
Inside-out suitcase, luggage rack

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In Conversation:

Jamie Isenstein and Stephanie Snyder

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Infinite Disco Soft-shoe (Autographed headshot), 2004
Black and white photograph

In Conversation:
Jamie Isenstein and Stephanie Snyder

Stephanie Snyder: *Jamie, what fascinates you about magic, vaudeville, theatricality, the imaginary, optical illusions, and the like?*

Jamie Isenstein: I do love the showy hokiness of the world of magic, the outmoded imagery, the mystery, the specificity of the props. I'm particularly intrigued by the way the props work – how they disguise a body, for example, or the way they look like one thing but are really another. For my purposes, I find deception through illusion an interesting perspective to think about the nature of representation (or misrepresentation) in life, and in art in particular. Maybe it's generational, but I am not interested in making art in which the mechanics of how the work was made must always be transparent (i.e., "the meaning is in the making"). Truthfulness in art is something I think about, but I would rather make art that acknowledges its own artifice and illusion than deconstruct it from the outside.

In my work I have often focused on theatrical themes such as vaudeville or magic to think about what performance *is* exactly; what does it mean to do something *live* in general, in front of an audience or not, and specifically in the context of art? Because conventional theater, or anything on a stage really, tends to have a clear beginning and end, I have also found theatrical themes to be useful metaphors for temporality, and by extension, mortality. Being on a stage, after all, is the ultimate act of being present, and so I often use these themes to think about presence and, conversely, absence.

I used these themes in my first solo show *Infinite Invisible Soft-shoe* at the artist-run gallery Guild and Greyshkul in 2004. The centerpiece of the show was a set of large, red curtains like those on a theater stage. I hid within the folds of the curtains and operated them as the rigger to make them dance to a ragtime version of the Bee Gees' "Stayin' Alive" (arranged by my now-husband, composer Paul Damian Hogan). The song was performed live in the gallery by a player piano. Also in the show was *Infinite Disco Soft-shoe*, a video of me and my animatronic skeleton wearing top hats, coattails, and canes while attempting a synchronized dance. Because of the animatronic skeleton and the player piano, it was almost impossible to discern whether the curtains were automated or if their movement was a live performance,

raising questions about what is animate and inanimate. The installation also played with traditional expectations of what is supposed to be visible on a stage; you would have expected to see a performance *in front of* the curtains, but instead, the performance was the curtains.

It's not just typical stage theater that interests me though. I try to play with the conventions of the stage, but I also love other nontraditional yet time-honored varieties of performance. I love circus clowns for example, because they come and go unexpectedly, so that the beginning and end of the performance is rarely evident. Sideshows and dime-museum performances appeal to me as well for their presentations of living beings in contexts of display rather than as theater. In 2007 I showed a project based on this model of performance at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles entitled *This Way to the Egress*. The project was based on a hoax attraction (the Egress) created by P. T. Barnum in order to trick an over-abundance of visitors into leaving his museum. For my installation I made a few suggestions of what the Egress could be, including a half-artist/half-bird hybrid called *The Egress*, which I played by wearing a ridiculous costume in the museum. Some of the other suggestions in the show for the Egress were based on doors, including *Eyehole*, a doorknob and key plate with a mirror behind the keyhole. When a visitor looked in the keyhole they saw an eye staring back at them. By presenting the Egress, I felt I was finally making good on what Barnum promised but never delivered. Since I wasn't always in my spot at the museum, there was a lot of coming and going, literally and figuratively, in that exhibition.

> **Stephanie**: *Let's talk more specifically about your use of props and found objects. How do props, readymades, and handcrafted objects interrelate throughout your work?*

Jamie: I use readymades because they so clearly *are* what they *are*. Nothing reads more obviously as a top hat than an actual top hat. A depiction of an object will never be read as clearly, and might instead raise confusions like those addressed by Magritte's painting *The Treason of Images*. This is the painting of the smoking pipe with the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (This is not a pipe). Of course the painting is a representation of a pipe and is not an actual pipe, but when someone points to the painting and asks, "What is that?" our immediate response is likely, "That's a pipe." With readymades, this confusion does not exist.

Frequently in my work I use mass-produced objects such as the "Will Return" sign found hanging in shop windows, or The Clapper™ (the gadget from TV commercials that allows lamps to be turned on and off by the sound of clapping). Other times I will make an object by hand that still appears to be a mass-produced product, such as

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Smoking Pipe (Version 2), 2006
Pipe, wooden table, humidifier, electric wiring, glue, enamel

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Fire (Straw with elbow), 2010
Porcelain straw, glass bottle, wick, fuel, fire

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
100 Year Calendar, 2008
Cotton rag paper, archival ink, glue, archival board

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Rug Woogie V, 2011
Performance on guitar with yarn

100 Year Calendar. That work looks like a standard desktop calendar but lasts a lot longer. When I make readymade kinds of objects by hand, I regularly modify them to do something they would not have done before. For example, *Fire* (*Straw*) is a drinking straw made of porcelain with a flame at the opening. In works like this, my tweaks are meant to give a living, magical, and often uncanny dimension to something that is normally banal, soulless, and inanimate.

Occasionally I mix the handmade and the readymade in one work, as in *Inside Outside Backstage Vase*, a handmade ceramic vase that displays a bouquet of artificial silk flowers along with a few natural ones. At first the work appears to be an ordinary arrangement, but over time the silk flowers stay fresh while the natural flowers slowly decay, revealing themselves. Since the work is allegorical along the lines of seventeenth-century still lifes of flowers – essentially it's a *vanitas* – I decided to use a wonky hand-building technique to give the vase a human quality as a way to suggest frailty and ephemerality. This is especially evident in juxtaposition to the assembly-line/machine-made quality of the silk flowers.

> **Stephanie**: *How do you interpret the art-historical tradition of the readymade given the volatile social conditions that birthed the avant-garde? I consider Duchamp's* Fountain *to be a passionate statement about the human body and humanity, not just a commentary about artistic value …*

Jamie: I often use my body as a readymade within my work by lending my arm or leg, etc., to a sculpture, so I have thought a lot about Duchamp. As you point out, he did choose objects that evoke the human body (besides the urinal, there was the bottle rack, the shovel – *In Advance of the Broken Arm* ...), but we are talking about Duchamp! It is hard for me to look beyond my total appreciation for the freedom he created for artistic production. As we all know, after Duchamp the craft of how well a work is made defers to its concept. After Duchamp, we can ask whether it matters who makes the components of an artwork when it is the intention, the meaning, and the context of the artwork that matters more. One thing I like about the readymade, as I mentioned before, is that it resists representation. It makes sense that, historically, the idea of the readymade emerged at the same time as abstraction was taking hold. After the readymade we no longer have to concern ourselves with how well an image reads as the thing depicted. Instead, we can just use the real thing.

> **Stephanie**: *We've talked a lot about what it means to perform, and I know you have a complicated relationship to both the word and the idea of "performance."*

Jamie: Some of my works, such as the *Rug Woogies* (a series of string instruments I weave rugs into as a way of playing the instruments) or *Infinite Invisible Soft-shoe* or *The Egress*, are essentially performances, so I don't have a problem with "performance" per se. Often it is not the act of performing that is interesting to me,

but rather what happens when the performance is over. If you want to do something live in an artistic context (a gallery, a museum, an art fair), then the performance does not have to abide by the conventions of the stage, but there are other considerations. For example, how do you address the possibility of the viewer seeing the props or the performance for however long the exhibition space is open, which the viewer would never see on a traditional stage behind a closed curtain? How do you deal with the possibility that the performance may be viewed from all sides? What do you do when the context in which you are exhibiting is actually a place of commerce where everything is for sale, such as a commercial gallery or an art fair?

I attempt to address these questions by finding ways to make sculptures that use my body as material. This way, the work can have the exciting and interesting elements of being live – and whatever ideas this implies – while at the same time it can have the advantages of being inanimate. Of course this creates other predicaments – for example, what do I do when I can't be in the work? To deal with this problem I hang a place-saver on the work, such as a "Will Return" or a "Gone Fishing" sign, to indicate I will be back to inhabit the work. Unlike theatrical performances, these works do not have a start time and an end time. They just go in and out of different phases. In one phase I am part of the work, and in the other phase I am not. But in this way the work satisfies the conditions of being a sculpture (they are three-dimensional objects; they can be exhibited for indefinite periods; they can be sold), so that is how I define them, rather than as performances.

Maybe it's just a question of semantics: what is sculpture, and what is performance? I like to make work that doesn't fit neatly into one artistic discipline. *Intermission Sign* is another example of this jumbling. It's a painting, but the easel is part of the work, so it's a sculpture. But also it's meant to reside on a stage, so if you really want to go nuts, you could say it's a performance.

> **Stephanie**: *In relationship to this, I want to ask you about two projects that position your body, and perhaps your identity, in very different ways. In the project you completed at Madame Tussaud's wax museum (resulting in the photograph* Waxworks*) we see you, your* entire *body, alone, unattached to other objects but surrounded by* fake *people. Then in contrast, in the* Rug Woogie *projects we witness you performing the work as you – Jamie Isenstein – uncloaked in real time.*

Jamie: There is something different about the *Rug Woogies*. Unlike in my other work, here it is the genuine me performing – as myself – playing an instrument, though in an unusual way. In other works that use my body you see parts of me, but mostly I am hidden and you never see my face. There are many reasons for this. With other works

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Infinite Invisible Soft-shoe, 2004
Installation view, Guild and Greyshkul, New York

in which I lend my body parts, my body is incorporated into the object, so my arm or leg, etc., appears disembodied and unattached to a human. This way it's easier to disassociate the limbs from my body and to read them as objects/readymades. Seeing a disembodied limb is an uncanny experience for the viewer, which is always entertaining and thought provoking. It introduces creepy but interesting questions about how the limb got there to the work. I also don't like to show my face because I want my limbs to read as prototypical limbs rather than as Jamie's limbs, specifically. Because I do not make art that intentionally addresses my personal experience, I don't want my identity to become a part of the work, which I am afraid would happen if I showed my face. Another reason I don't like to show my face is because then I can't escape the people who are looking at me. It's too awkward!

The project that resulted in the *Waxworks* photo is a bit thornier. In that work, I am trying to present myself as a wax figure that *looks like* me. My entire body is visible, including my face, but I'm attempting to become an inanimate object. So

I would not call that acting, or I might say I am acting, but as an object rather than another human. At the wax museum I did have to ignore people inspecting me, and it was difficult! I found their assumption that I was just a very accurate wax figure so funny, I couldn't keep the pose for very long without breaking!

My project *Inside Out with Jamie Isenstein* is a public radio-style show in which I use ventriloquism for my co-host Skeleton and our guests. In this case, that is definitely me acting as a radio host named Jamie Isenstein as well as the other characters. Also, I would say I'm acting when I'm playing the Egress, even though I'm acting partly as myself as a half artist/half bird.

> **Stephanie**: *You are a woman with a female body. What does this mean to your work?*

Jamie: People often wonder what it means for a female to turn herself into an object. Am I taking control of the objectification women are subjected to by objectifying myself? Personally that is not my intention, but I do acknowledge I choose to do some of the works I do because I am female. Weaving a harp is practically a clichéd female activity! Though when I conceived of the *Rug Woogies* I was thinking a lot about Harpo of the Marx Brothers. Is it funny that Harpo plays the harp because he is already presented as kind of effeminate with his longer, curly hair? In *Dancing Pop-up Fishing Sculpture*, I wear fishnet tights and a high-heeled tap shoe on my exposed leg to reference one of those tap-dancing products, like the Old Gold cigarette cartons from early television commercials. Only in this case, the tap-dancing object has just one leg and is stuck on top of a pedestal. I've only ever seen women

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Inside Out with Jamie Isenstein (Press shot), 2004
Black and white photograph

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
The Egress, 2007
Bird costume (feathers, fake fur, fabric, buttons, acrylic paint, glue), artist or wood frame, gold enamel, picture lamp, red velvet curtain, "Gone Fishing" sign

as tap-dancing products, though I guess there's really no way to know for sure since their heads are usually not visible.

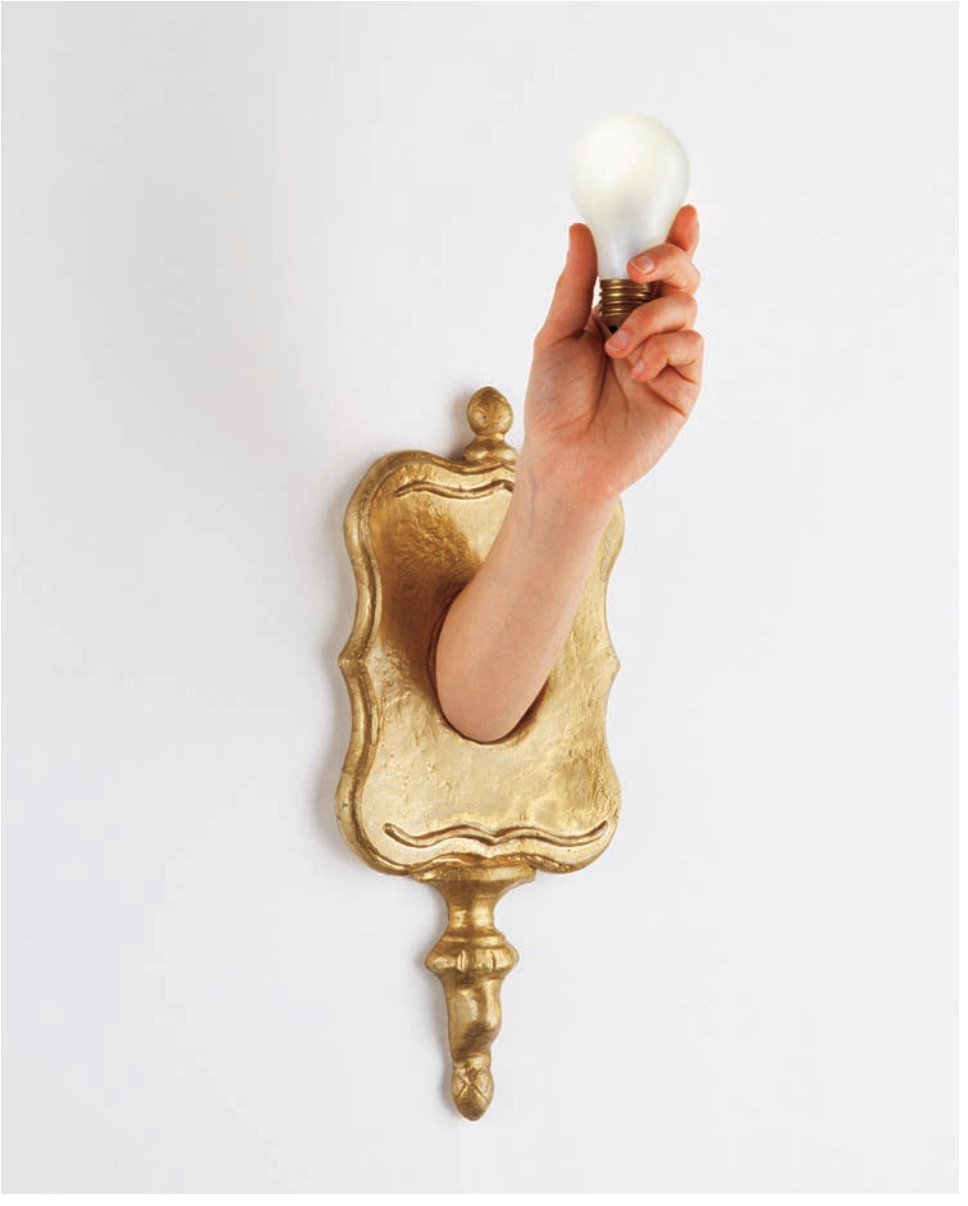
There is some gender confusion in the *Acéphal Magical* installation, in the *Saw the Lady* sculpture. In that installation, a two-channel video of a headless magician playing a musical saw (accompanied by a video of an oscillating fan playing bottles of water) is presented alongside a sculpture based on the "Saw the Lady in Half" illusion. Only this time, instead of sawing the lady in half, the head has been sawed off. In the *Acéphal Magical* video, it is not exactly apparent that the magician is female, but the headless body does suggest it. It is clear the figure in the *Saw the Lady* box is the magician rather than the assistant because of the shoes. Where one would expect a male, there is possibly a female, and where one would expect female shoes, there are male ones.

> **Stephanie**: *What happens when you can no longer inhabit the work? It seems as though your living presence is the work's "certificate of authenticity." Do you imagine a kind of ceremonial letting go? And what happens as your body changes?*

Jamie: I still plan to occupy these works as my body ages, if I can. Imagine *Magic Fingers* when my hand is old and wrinkled! If some physical constraint keeps me from inhabiting the work, then the "Will Return" sign or whatever place-saver I use will remain until I can come back, whenever that is. Who can say for certain I won't return in three hundred years, reincarnated as a fly? Eventually these works will spend a lot of time waiting! Once they are in the waiting phase, that's what they do. It's like *Waiting for Godot*, starring sculptures. So there's no need for a ceremonial ending because there is no ending.

> **Stephanie**: *I want to talk about the role of your collectors. After purchasing your work, do your collectors then mediate your relationship to the work? Do you create contracts with collectors that allow you to retain specific forms of access and control?*

Jamie: I am willing to lend my body to the works that incorporate my body, wherever they go. If the work is sold to a collector and displayed in their house, then I will inhabit the work at their house. I don't create contracts that oblige me access to the work, though, because I cannot predict what will happen in my life or the collector's. All I can offer is that I will do my best to inhabit the works whenever asked. So far, only a few collectors have taken me up on the offer! Typically it has been for parties, which is fun, but I try to occupy the works when no one is looking, as well.



JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Magic Lamp, 2005
Plaster, gold leaf finish, epoxy, magic light bulb, arm with hand or "Will Return" sign, and velvet curtain

The collector does play an unusually large role in my work. My proposition is that these works are objects even if they incorporate my body. It takes a very special collector to agree to see the works this way and give the works the consideration they need to fulfill this proposition. Because of my ongoing relationship with the work, I prefer to know who owns it, and I hope I can develop a relationship with them. I want to be accessible should they want to invite me to inhabit the work at their convenience, or in case I would like to inhabit it at mine. Recently a few of my works were promised to a museum, so those works are changing hands. I am curious to see if the museum will honor this relationship and invite me to occupy the works without having ever seen them inhabited before, or let me borrow them in order to inhabit them elsewhere. If not, the works will just sit in their waiting phase until something else happens to them, when I have access to them again in the future.

> **Stephanie**: *Do you ever see yourself organizing others to inhabit or re-perform your work, like Marina Abramović did for her MoMA retrospective in 2010?*

Jamie: No, I am the only person who can inhabit these particular works. I might one day make a new body of work that would incorporate another person or people, but with the works that specifically use place-savers such as the "Will Return" sign, only I am allowed in them. One of the interesting things about the "Will Return" sign is that it contains a conceit – when you look at the sign, of course you think, "Wait! One day she won't be back! What happens then?" The "Will Return" sign's promise that I *will* be back suggests a kind of immortality, but at the same time, the sign reminds you that one day I'll be gone for good. If I were to allow other people to inhabit my work, then, sure, it would live on in perpetuity in its activated phase, but the work would lose its meaning as a metaphor for the transience of life. All the complications I love about using my impermanent body would be too easily resolved. That's not to say there aren't interesting aspects to working with someone else's body, or a rotating cast of other actors for a different group of artworks. I am not ready to limit myself to using only me forever!

You were asking about authenticity earlier. If someone else inhabited these works they'd lose their authenticity as *my work* precisely because I wouldn't be there (or be returning), and my intention is for me to be the work's only occupant. I say all this, but let it be known, if Andy Kaufman or Elvis wants to inhabit my work after I'm gone, I'm okay with that. I would also be open to my daughter inhabiting the works because she is half me, although I guess, in that case, she should only half-activate them.

> **Stephanie**: *Imagining the work without you is a melancholy business for me, but I also find the existential nature of your work deeply* real*, and*

deeply rewarding. Imagine an exhibition of your work in the future when you're no longer here. How do you want curators to exhibit the work? With or without displaying didactic imagery illustrating your long-gone body? Have you thought about creating any conditions regarding the work's future display and elucidation?

Jamie: Once I'm gone, I hope people are still willing to exhibit these works! As for showing an uninhabited work with a photograph, I'm still deciding how I feel about that. A few of the works exist in photographic form – as related but separate artworks (*Magic Fingers* and *Magic Lamp*, in particular). I can imagine placing the photographic version of *Magic Fingers* next to the physical installation of *Magic Fingers* hung with the "Will Return" sign, and that doesn't bother me. At the same time, in Marina Abramović's MoMA retrospective, I was disappointed to see photographs of Marina performing individual works next to actual re-performances of the same works by other people. I felt this negated Marina's claim that performance artworks can be re-performed by others and maintain their original integrity. If the re-performed versions of Marina's works were just as significant as their original manifestations, then why was it necessary to include photographs of the original performances? In my case, does exhibiting a photograph of an inhabited work next to the actual sculpture invalidate the work's inactive state? I don't think so, but the jury is still out.

Stephanie: *The "Will Return" sign is such an iconic element in your work. It's a humble and enigmatic object – poetic, even, in its promise of return and renewal.*

Jamie: I use the "Will Return" sign as a kind of place-saver for *me*. My assertion is that the sign turns a performance into a sculpture. And of course I like it because it speaks to both presence and absence, immortality and mortality. But I also like to use the sign because it draws from the language of commerce. It suggests that my presence in the art is *work*. When I am lending my body to an artwork, I do see it as a kind of job. The inside of a sculpture is not a sacred space for me, or a place where I meditate and think about having been transformed into an artwork. Rather I spend my time distracting myself by reading or listening to audiobooks. There are many other references to the world of commerce in my work (including the act of offering performative sculptures for sale as a subtle critique of consumerism, for one), but the "Will Return" sign is the most unmistakable, I think.

I also like the "Will Return" sign because it is so graphic and so beautiful in its simplicity. I like that it's from the everyday world but suggests so much more. In 2005 I made a version of the "Will Return" sign that had an operating clock in the back.

I removed the second hand so the hour and minute hand moved imperceptibly. I had been asked to do something performative in The Wrong Gallery in New York City, which was about a foot deep and the width of a doorway – too small to do anything in there! I put the "Will Return" sign in the door and set the clock ten minutes ahead, so that if people came to the door expecting a performance they would assume they needed to come back in ten minutes. By then the clock would have advanced ten minutes and I would never have to return! So the sign does suggest work, but it can also provide time for leisure too!

> **Stephanie**: *Do you research the cultural origins of objects such as the "Will Return" sign? There are times I regard an artwork of yours and see an anthropological sensibility at work, and wonder about the evolution of some of the simplest, ubiquitous objects that we live with. You allow us to witness material culture in a quiet yet profound way – doing its own work, performing its own job. You also regularly use old-fashioned, anachronistic objects and "textures" in your work. Is this nostalgic?*

Jamie: In my work and in my drawings especially, I do a lot of cataloguing of types. For example, how many kinds of clown shoes are there? What are the varieties of shirt collars? I want to capture that feeling of wonder and possibility from the variety and seemingly unlimited choice people felt at the end of the nineteenth century, when there was time for leisurely window shopping and department stores were brand-new, or that people might feel now while shopping online. Art is usually another kind of product, after all, so products often take center stage in my work. And yes, I do as much research as I can on these objects/products and their antecedents to help me understand their function in our society.

I frequently use old-fashioned and out-of-date objects and aesthetics, though I do not think of my work as nostalgic. Using stuff from the past is a way for me to address contemporary concerns without being too didactic. There is often a play in my work between objects that appear old, and objects what were contemporary with the artwork's making. Sometimes I use an old-fashioned object because I find its style reads as iconic or classic. For example, I might choose to draw a rotary dial telephone instead of a cordless rechargeable model. Or sometimes I might choose the cordless rechargeable model because I want it to read as utilitarian and everyday, of this moment. Of course I'm aware that even an object that seems ordinary and ubiquitous now will one day seem outdated.

One of the main concerns in my work is the way in which objects have their own kind of mortality. The photo *Snuffer* suggests this most explicitly. It is an image of a candle bending away from a hand holding a snuffer to extinguish the flame. Probably

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Untitled (Victorian mask with eye cut-outs, blue bonnet), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper

no one thought more about the mortality of objects than Walter Benjamin, especially as he investigated the decaying shopping arcades of Paris, long after their heyday. In wandering the arcades, he witnessed all kinds of outmoded fashions still displayed in the windows. Basically, and I am grossly summarizing here, Benjamin believed it was through commodification that objects gained their mortality. Fashion's limitless appetite for the new causes objects to become out-of-date. When we see something that has recently gone out of style, we shudder at it, because it is an uncanny reminder that time has passed and we are not getting any younger.

> **Stephanie**: *You've always had a very active and descriptive drawing practice. Do the drawings perform a particular function in relationship to the final sculptures or installations? The inter-title drawings seem particularly abstract. They reference the graphic framing devices used in silent movies.*

Jamie: The drawings are a way for me to expand an idea into a larger constellation of ideas without having to actually realize the ideas as physical objects. I call them "drawings" but in fact they are usually pencil and watercolor. Often the ideas depicted in the drawings would be impossible for me to enact in real life without incurring bodily harm. For example, I made a drawing of fingers in a chandelier, which I could not turn into a sculpture without cutting off my fingers. Other times, the images in

the drawings are too insignificant to warrant a more substantial work, although they might incorporate a lot of ideas I'm considering. The watercolor diptych of a hand holding an earplug (on the left), and an ear (on the right), for example, is an exercise in thinking about how the body and cultural artifacts, such as the earplug, intersect. The diptych also suggests an impending silence (which is of course ironic in an already silent artwork). The inter-title drawings also consider silence. When I was conceiving these works, I was struck by the beauty of the borders on the title cards of silent films, and I decided to highlight them as drawings. I liked the idea of alluding to the muted speech of silent film by depicting empty title cards with just the borders. The title cards are like empty stages waiting for a performance to begin.

Making the watercolors allows me the freedom to explore, think, and make connections without having to commit to a full-scale project. But also I find drawing to be a pleasurable activity. When I'm frustrated with the progress of a larger work, I can stop and work on a drawing for more immediate satisfaction. I often make my drawings into diptychs and triptychs to play with the borders of the page or to suggest a sequence, like film stills. Also there is an ongoing narrative between my skeleton and me in the drawings, which I could not create in a different medium (except possibly animation). Usually these drawings are roughly symmetrical or repetitive. I think of them as if the person in my X-ray had a mind of his own and we are doing stuff together, like toasting cocktails (since I tend to mostly draw hands).

I think of my style of watercolor painting as reminiscent of nineteenth-century botanical illustrations. Over the years my handling of the paint has become a little looser, but the quality of my line, my color palette, often my attention to detail, and sometimes my exhaustive categorizing is similar. Historical botanical drawings emphasize observation and description. They are supposed to be as true to life as possible and even more "truthful" than photographs. In my drawings, I take that objective approach and apply it to a subjective, physically impossible idea, like a six-foot-long arm.

> **Stephanie**: *How do your large-scale works begin? How do pieces like* Acéphal Magical *or the* Rug Woogie *series come into being?*

Jamie: I just go about my life trying to entertain and educate myself, and when an idea appears in my head, I hope I have a piece of paper on hand to write it down. A lot of my works draw from art history, while others begin with ideas from fiction. *Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug*, for example, was based on the fable of the wolf in sheep's clothing, which is a story that usually begins with deception and camouflage. Only in my work, I am in the wolf's clothing, the wolf is in the sheep's clothing, and the sheep is in the bear's clothing! And we're all stacked up like rugs in a rug store.

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug, 2009
Bear, sheep, wolf, rug, woman or "Will Return" sign

My 2010 installation *Empire of Fire* was also based on a work of fiction. In this case I decided to do the installation after re-reading Sartre's play *No Exit*. When I describe that work, it often follows a surrealist story line: "First you see scattered furniture (the actual set for *No Exit*) on fire like a pyre, and you turn to look for a way to extinguish the (admittedly small) flames. You see a fire hose hanging in the corner, but instead of dispensing water, there is a hand dripping from the hose. Also in the space is a photograph of a hand trying to put out the flame of a candle, but the candle is bending away!" (I put the *Snuffer* photo into the installation.)

My ideas are always evolving as well. I had originally conceived of the video that eventually became *Acéphal Magical* as a beaver sitting on a log playing a musical saw. At the time I was examining my role in my art and how conflicted I felt about showing my face in a sculpture. My joke was that it would be easier to use my body anonymously if I didn't have a head. If nothing else, that would help clarify any subject/object confusions that might exist in my work. Around then I became more interested in theories of headlessness and began reading up on Bataille and Washington Irving, etc. Later I decided the figure playing the musical saw should be a headless magician playing the instrument from the classic illusion "Saw the Lady in Half," suggesting the saw as the instrument of decapitation. I wanted to draw on the fact that the saw happens to sound like a human voice when played, and so could stand in as a kind of replacement for the missing head.

As for the accompanying video of the oscillating fan playing the bottles of water, earlier in the summer before I made the video, I sat on a beach with a bottle and noticed sounds emanating from the opening as the wind passed over it. At home

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Empire of Fire, 2010
Installation views and detail, Meyer Reigger, Karlsruhe, Germany

I tried playing bottles with hair dryers and oscillating fans, and it worked! I decided to use this setup of replacing the human mouth with a fan in a musical performance to accompany the video of the headless saw-playing magician. The fan would become a surrogate for the performer, like another player piano – machine replacing human. I commissioned my husband to write a composition for bottles and musical saw. The final result is elegiac but beautiful, and a little eerie.

With the *Rug Woogies*, as I was conceiving the work I wanted to reverse what I had done before, in making sculptures that had performative elements but were sculptures. I decided to do the opposite and enact a performance that had sculptural aspects but was a performance – though the end result of these performances look and act like sculptures.

> **Stephanie**: *You mentioned Magritte earlier. Do you think much about your work's relationship to Surrealism and Pop Art?*

Jamie: I do love certain things about Surrealism and Pop Art. Of course my use of the readymade fits neatly into both categories. (I have my criticisms of the movements as well, though. I can't stand Surrealism's treatment of women, but who can?) I am drawn to Surrealism's elastic and uncanny use of the body, as well as its skewed logic. I find it very funny. That Magritte painting *The Treason of Images* was in fact the jumping-off point for an exhibition of mine that featured the works *Arm Chair* and *Smoking Pipe*. *Smoking Pipe* was essentially a sculptural embodiment of Magritte's painting. The work is a pipe in the same shape as the one in the painting, sitting upright on a table. Smoke wafts from its bowl intermittently without a smoker

around. So obviously this is no ordinary pipe, if not exactly a pipe at all. *Arm Chair* is also clearly Surrealist in its form – a chair with real arms where the "arms" of the chair should be, and real legs where the "legs" of the chair should be. But also it enacts a "de-metaphorizing" of the chair by turning the represented into the real in the spirit of Magritte's painting.

As for Pop Art, I would say there is a certain celebration of popular culture in my work. The life preservers that say "Wishin' I Was Fishin'" and "Gone Fishing" from *Dancing Pop-up Fishing Sculpture* came from a nautical decorations store in Florida. I love that I can buy something so kitschy and it says exactly what I need. My radio show *Inside Out with Jamie Isenstein* is probably my work that is the most satirical of pop culture. In the one episode I've been able to air on the radio, my co-host Skeleton and I interview a bottle of lotion about Lotion's book on the cosmetic surgeries of celebrities. It was pretty silly.

> **Stephanie**: *Who are the conceptual (and performance) artists that have influenced you the most? Is there a discernible group? Has it changed much over time?*

Jamie: When I think about performance art, there is actually no one who comes to mind. I'm more interested in work by conceptual artists who use their own body or that of another person's in a sculptural way, rather than as "performance art."

I love the work by Charles Ray from the 1970s where he uses his own body in both photographs of himself interacting with objects and in his performances. I particularly love his work *Clock Man*, where he suspended himself inside a clock with his legs as the pendulum. For a day he operated the clock according to what he thought the time was, though in the end he was three hours ahead. I also love Ray's series of body sculptures from the early 1980s where he interacted with pieces and shapes of steel, naked. I would have loved to see these works live because the interaction with the spectator and the artist was apparently difficult. I still have the same problem Ray had then of how to get in and out of a work when someone is watching. (My "Will Return" sign doesn't quite address this!)

I love a lot of Jannis Kounellis's work from the late 1960s for its mix of found objects and live materials (birds, horses, a baby, a woman). When Kounellis had his first solo show in New York at Sonnabend Gallery in 1972, he showed a work called *Ragazza* that consisted of a woman (the lovely Susan Ensley!) lying on a metal plinth, wrapped in a blanket with a propane torch strapped to her foot. In another show he tethered twelve horses to the gallery wall as if the gallery were an actual stable rather than a metaphorical one.

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
The Egressess, 2007
Door, two peep holes

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Untitled (Curtain), 2009
Curtains, curtain rod, intruder's legs or "Will Return" sign

Besides Kounellis, there are other artists from the Arte Povera movement whose work I find interesting and clever, including Alighiero Boetti and Piero Manzoni. I made a work called *Escape Artist's Luggage* in the spirit of Manzoni's *Socle du Monde* (*Pedestal for the World*). Manzoni's work was simply a pedestal turned upside down to suggest the earth was sitting on top of it as a work of art. In my work a suitcase was turned inside out, so we are all now in the suitcase and inside the suitcase is the void.

And *The Void!* I don't know if Yves Klein counts as a conceptual artist, but I love how he was both a trickster and transcendent at the same time. I made a work criticizing his 1958 exhibition *The Void* in Paris (*La spécialisation de la sensibilité à l'état de matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée: Le Vide*; The Void: The Specialization of Sensibility in the State of Raw Material into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility). For that show Klein had presented what he said was an empty gallery, but when you look at the installation shots, there is clearly a vitrine and a window covered by a curtain. For my work, I presented the window curtain from his show as an artwork, and then I stood behind it like a thief in a Scooby Doo cartoon, inserting myself as an interloper into art history.

There is also Bruce Nauman, of course. I could go on and on. I love his multi-disciplinary approach, his use of humor and puns, his use of his own body … everything you'd expect.

Stephanie: *There are many references to death in your work. Death, magic, humor, etc. Is there a consistent cultural or symbolic way in which these things relate to one another for you?*

Jamie: When you make work about death or even just questions of presence and absence, it is so heavy; you have to counter it with humor. That's why my skeleton character is a vaudevillian wisecracker. In general there are a lot of morbid gags and humorous death references in my work. The *Book of the Dead* series, for example, is a bunch of gallery sign-in books with that title in gold on the cover of each book. No one checks the front of the books before they sign them! I've been placing them in galleries around America and Europe since 2005. *Book of the Dead* is a practical joke on the art world, but they are serious, too, because they are the most accurate books ever written.

But yes, there is a lot of death, mortality, disappearance in my work. At Reed I studied Northern Renaissance and Baroque art with Peter Parshall and came away deeply impressed by both the idea of allegory and the *vanitas* genre. I was particularly struck by the collapsing of time in the paintings of Hans Baldung Grien, such as *Three Ages of Woman and Death*, which depicts a woman as a baby, a young woman, an elderly woman, and as a skeleton. It was as if all the versions of one person could exist at the same time. When I use my skeleton as a character, it's in keeping with this tradition.

I also love the *Dance of Death* series by Hans Holbein, which depicts a skeleton dancing with people in various stations in life. Usually the skeleton is playing an instrument, so the assumption is that once the music stops, the person dancing is dead. I decided to flip this idea on its head for *Infinite Disco Soft-shoe*. The video, which I mentioned earlier, is an animatronic version of my skeleton and I doing a synchronized soft-shoe dance. The video is on an infinite loop, so unlike the *Dance of Death*, my dance never ends.

Stephanie: *How did you become a "performer," and how were you influenced by your time at Reed, and also your childhood growing up in Portland?*

Jamie: I've always been attracted to vaudeville and anything theatrical, as well as nineteenth-century entertainments, probably because of my grandparents' minor brushes with show business and dancing. My first use of those themes in making art might have been a painting I did in a class at Reed College with Michael Knutson, of my friend in a harlequin bodysuit. He was sitting on a simple wooden chair in front of a door with a bored, doleful look on his face. The subject was a little Picasso-esque, but I still love that painting!

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Flowers of Evil (Hello Darkness), 2010
C-print

I learned about performance art in my Reed sculpture classes taught by Gerri Ondrizek. If I had gone to a larger school or university at that time – in the mid-1990s – I probably would have learned about sculpture in sculpture classes and performance in performance classes. But at Reed, the art department was so small Gerri had to cover a lot of ground in order to introduce us to the wide range of types of artwork being made. That interdisciplinary approach was great for me. By the end of my time at Reed, my thesis project was a giant mess of sculpture and performance. I had read about the nineteenth-century pastime of *tableaux vivants*, so I made my own versions based on eighteenth-century French caricatures of people performing typical grooming practices. I had actors powdering wigs and applying fake moles, etc. On top of that, everything was covered in cake frosting, the wigs were made from marshmallows, the wig powder was powdered sugar. Even the Rococo chairs were covered in frosted flowers. Unlike my work, at least until now, actors performed this work rather than me.

Stephanie: *Wow! Do you have images of this?*

Jamie: The images should still be in the copy of my thesis book in Reed's thesis tower. I'm too embarrassed to look at them now!

As for growing up in Portland, I'm sure being surrounded by the music scene influenced my interest in performance. In high school I was the resident go-go dancer for my friends' band. We spent a lot of time hanging out and seeing bands play at the X-Ray Café, an all-ages music club on Burnside Street that existed only during the four years I was in high school.

Also I'm sure my visits to the local theme parks influenced me. The historic Oaks Amusement Park with its floating roller-skating rink and suspended, grand Wurlitzer organ is just a few blocks from Reed. But also there is The Enchanted Forest an hour away. That place had a profound effect on me as a kid! I had nightmares about their haunted house because it looks like a true, abandoned Victorian house in the woods. The Enchanted Forest is supposed to be cute and fun, but actually the place is incredibly spooky because it's situated in the forest. Moss grows on the handrails of the paths, and some of the older attractions smell like mold. There's a sense they're perpetually just trying to hold off decay, from being swallowed by the trees.

I love Disneyland – having grown up on the West Coast I've been there more times than I can count. I honestly appreciate the seamless, transformative experience it offers. It is a true *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the Wagnerian sense. But I love The Enchanted Forest more. Its shoddy construction is the opposite of the veneer of perfection at Disneyland. It doesn't help that many of the attractions at The Enchanted Forest are based on *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Somehow the vignettes you walk through manage to depict the scariest parts of the stories. Unlike the Disneyland narratives, the attractions at The Enchanted Forest do not have happy endings. When you visit the Hansel and Gretel candy house, you're confronted with a scene of the witch trying to force Gretel into an oven, while Hansel is on the floor, locked in a cage holding a bone! In another part of the park, you have to walk through the witch's gaping mouth.

> **Stephanie**: *I also grew up going to the small, homespun Enchanted Forest, and was equally horrified by the evil witch, people parading through her toothless mouth! Disneyland is boring; The Enchanted Forest is electrifying. Why does this little "folk" environment feel so much more real?*

Jamie: I don't know. I suppose it's because the whole place was made by hand, so it's a bit rough. You can feel the earthiness. Most importantly, though, at The Enchanted Forest they aren't trying to sell you anything – other than an admission ticket. Sometimes "real" is just genuineness.

ROGER TOFTE
The Witch,
The Enchanted Forest, Turner, Oregon

Will Return

David Velasco

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
The Egress, 2007
Bird costume (feathers, fake fur, fabric, buttons, acrylic paint, glue), artist or wood frame, gold enamel, picture lamp, red velvet curtain, "Gone Fishing" sign

Will Return
David Velasco

We start with a sign, hanging inside an oval frame. WILL RETURN.
It's a promise and a premise: that the someone who hung this sign is coming back.
That you or I will be there to receive her.
That when we're together, we'll understand our reason for meeting.
That she'll be just as she was when she left, or that she'll have what we're looking for.
That I will be the same, or at least close enough to the same as to be recognizable.

The sign is one element of Jamie Isenstein's *Magic Fingers* (2003), an "empty" picture frame – really a gilded hole carved into a wall – that at any given time features either the artist's fingers (miming gestures appropriated from art-history textbooks) or a familiar blue-and-white clock sign bearing the words WILL RETURN. In this droll, simple phrase Isenstein summons all the eschatological fantasies that animate and structure our persistent myths: Home is on the horizon. Paradise beckons. Someday we'll be reacquainted with loved ones, the garden, our alienated labor. Our divided selves will be made whole. Whatever this thing is we've lost, or that we "have" and dread losing, it will come back. Promise. Eternal recurrence makes contact with and twists the basic fact of mortality, of the constitutive effects of death and loss and trauma on our existence.

There's a playful nostalgia to the WILL RETURN sign, the shopkeeper's mantra. It symbolizes the "work break," itself a symptom of the tidy regularity of the old bourgeois timetable, when you might arrive at a place and expect that person to be there, hawking their wares. This WILL RETURN and its promise is part of the social contract that first made capitalism tenable. And it's funny to think of it now: Can you remember that age when we weren't all continually, commercially available? I yearn for the WILL RETURN, now transmuted into the "out-of-office" auto-response, itself an increasingly anachronistic symbol of an age when "time off" had currency in the workplace, or when the workplace itself constituted a place instead of an array of scenes, of ever more mobile screens summoning thumbs and nagging for attention.

Isenstein's art plays with deferral, with mortality and the "being there-ness" of what we still call "performance art." Despite the jokey undertones (witness the artist standing still amid statues in a wax museum, or riffing on Mondrian's

Broadway Boogie Woogie as she weaves an abstract tapestry around the strings of a concert harp), this art of "presence" is a significant chapter in art history. To get caught up in the art of presence you've got to have a sense of humor; otherwise you're tempting bathos. Sleight of hand's been a signature of the form at least since 1961, when Piero Manzoni pulled off his Duchampian *Magic Bases*, wooden plinths that, when stood upon, transformed the participant into a "living sculpture." Then there's Gilbert & George in 1969 with *The Singing Sculpture*, in which the artists themselves danced and sang "Underneath the Arches," an old Flanagan and Allen standard, for hours on end. For Isenstein, perhaps the most resonant image in this lineage is Charles Ray's *In Memory of Sadat* (1981–85), in which the artist himself would lie for short stretches of time inside two steel boxes, with only a single arm and leg exposed, poking through little arm- and leg-size holes. We might also consider our current mainstream artist of "presence," Marina Abramović, though the campy seriousness of her endurance contests seems at odds with Isenstein's kind of work.

Indeed, for Isenstein, presence is only part of the game. It's not about her "aura" or diva-like being, but about her body as prop or material in a sculpture that keeps on going even when she's not "there" to activate it – as in *Dancing Pop-Up Fishing Sculpture* (2010), in which the artist (sometimes) sits, one leg and arm dangling out of a jaunty, ragtag sculpture. When she's in it, the hand holds a life preserver inscribed with the words WISHIN' I WAS FISHIN.' Other times, another life preserver sits propped on the sculpture, reading GONE FISHING. Isenstein's just as interested in thematizing and riffing on art's staginess, and this is part of her work's charm and intelligence. It's what makes her a real artist of presence rather than simply an artist who's present.

JAMIE ISENSTEIN
Invisible Disco Soft-shoe, 2004 (detail)
Installation view, Guild and Greyshkul, New York

Exhibition Checklist

Jamie Isenstein : Will Return
Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery,
Reed College

Infinite Disco Soft-shoe, 2002–2004
Single-channel video on CRT monitor
Dimensions variable
Exhibition copy
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Jamie Isenstein

Magic Fingers, 2003
Gilded picture frame, picture light, plastic hemisphere, human hand or "Will Return" sign
Dimensions variable
Collection of Thea Westreich Wagner and
Ethan Wagner, New York
Photo: Adam Reich

Inside Out Headshots (Skeleton and Lotion), 2004
Pen and lotion on black and white photographs
Diptych, 10.5 x 8.5 in. each
Edition 3/5
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Jamie Isenstein

Eyehole, 2005
Brass, copper, plastic, enamel, acrylic, cardboard, glass mirror
8.5 x 2.5 x 3 in.
Edition AP 3
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Herman Feldhaus

Acéphal Magical, 2007
Two-channel video projection
Dimensions variable
Exhibition copy
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

Clap Magic, 2007
CRT monitor, "The Clapper,"™ single-channel video, custom-made lamp, shade
Dimensions variable
Edition 2/3
Miller Meigs Collection
Photo: Thomas Müller

Snuffer, 2008
C-print
19 x 24 in.
Edition 2/5
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Jamie Isenstein

Magic Jacket, 2009
Tailcoat, coat rack, hanger, appearing flowers, two foam balls, thumb tip, two silks, rope, two decks of cards, matches, Devil's Handkerchief, handkerchief, one dollar bill, two balloons, watch, bottle top, two coins, wand
66.5 x 17.5 x 13.5 in.
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

Waxworks, 2009
C-print
30 x 40 in.
Edition 3/5
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
[All images of wax figures depicted are images owned and created by Madame Tussauds.]
Photo: Jason Schmidt

Dancing Pop-up Fishing Sculpture, 2010
Fabric, glue, paint, "Worm in a Can" gag dinner mints, pillow stuffing, human leg, fishnet tights, tap shoe, human arm, "Wishin' I Was Fishin'" or "Gone Fishing" life preservers, pedestal
Dimensions variable
Miller Meigs Collection
Photo: Thomas Müller

Delicious After Dinner Mints, 2010
C-print
19 x 14.5 in.
Edition 4/5
Collection of Andrew Kreps, New York
Photo: Jamie Isenstein

Inside Outside Backstage Vase, 2011
Natural and artificial flowers, ceramic vase, water
Dimensions variable
Edition 2/3
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: David Hanauer

Untitled (Silent film inter-title border with arrows), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper
11 x 14 in.
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

Untitled (Silent film inter-title border with curves), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper
11 x 14 in.
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

Intermission Sign, 2013
Brass easel, stretched canvas, acrylic
59 x 37 x 23 in.
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

Untitled (Ear plug and ear), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper
Diptych, (left to right) 12 x 16 in., 14 x 11 in.
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

Rug Woogie X, 2013
(Pictured: **Rug Woogie II**, 2010)
Performance on harp with yarn
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

Book of the Dead, 2013
(Pictured: **Book of the Dead**, 2005-2010)
Guest book, gold paint, leather
11 x 8.5 x .5 in., closed
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

Untitled (Yellow, turquoise, red clown shoe), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper
Triptych, 12 x 16 in. each
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

Untitled (Purple boot clown shoe), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper
Diptych, 12 x 16 in. each
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

Untitled (Green, blue, red polka dot clown shoe with kiltie), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper
12 x 16 in.
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

Works Illustrated

ALL WORKS BY JAMIE ISENSTEIN
EXCEPT WHERE INDICATED

p. 4
Empire of Fire (Fire Hose), 2010
Fire hose, hanger, hand or "Will Return" sign
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe/Berlin, Germany
Photo: David Hanauer

p. 7
Inside Out Winter Hat Dance, 2005
900 lbs of ice, top hat
Installation view
The Wrong Gallery, New York
Courtesy of the artist and
The Wrong Gallery, New York
Photo: Jason Nocito

p. 8
Inside Out Winter Hat Dance, 2005
900 lbs of ice (partially melted), top hat
Installation view
The Wrong Gallery, New York
Courtesy of the artist and
The Wrong Gallery, New York
Photo: Andrew Kreps

p. 58
ARTIST UNKNOWN
Edm. Renk Kortkunstner, ca.1915
Stone Lithograph
26 x 18 in.
Alex Hoenig, Lithographer
Star Printing Co., Berlin
Courtesy of Ken Trombly, Bethesda, MD
Photo: Irene Owsley

p. 61
Magic Fingers, 2003
Gilded picture frame, picture light, plastic hemisphere, human hand or "Will Return" sign
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Adam Reich

p. 63
ARTIST UNKNOWN
Talma, Queen of Coins, ca.1905
Stone lithograph
28 x 19 inches
Adolf Friedlander, Lithographer
Hamburg, Germany
Courtesy of Ken Trombly, Bethesda, MD
Photo: Irene Owsley

p. 64
This Way to the Egress, 2007
Installation view, The Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
Courtesy of the artist and
The Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
Photo: Brian Forrest

p. 67
Arm Chair, 2006
Wood, metal, nylon, raw cotton, linen, jeans, shoes, hardware, human arms, human legs, or "Will Return" sign
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

p. 68
ARTIST UNKNOWN
Adelaide Herrmann Hindoo Magic, ca.1900
Stone lithograph
29.5 x 20 in.
The Metropolitan Litho, New York
Courtesy of Ken Trombly, Bethesda, MD
Photo: Irene Owsley

p. 70-71
Acéphal Magical, 2007
Two-channel video projection
Dimensions variable
Installation view, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

p. 72
Saw the Lady, 2007
Wood, sheet-metal, copper hardware, human body and patent leather tuxedo shoes or head and "Will Return" sign
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

p. 74
ARTIST UNKNOWN
Vandredi Zauber-Revue, ca.1931
Stone lithograph
18 x 20.5 in.
Adolf Friedlander, Lithographer
Hamburg, Germany
Courtesy of Ken Trombly, Bethesda, MD
Photo: Irene Owsley

p. 75
ARTIST UNKNOWN
Marbrus présente une terrifiante attraction?, ca.1930
Stone lithograph
25 x 18.5 in.
Courtesy of Ken Trombly, Bethesda, MD
Photo: Irene Owsley

p. 76-77
Escape Artist's Luggage, 2005
Inside out suitcase and luggage rack
11 x 25 x 33 in. (closed)
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Herman Feldhaus

p. 82
Infinite Disco Soft-shoe (Autographed headshot), 2004
Black and white photograph
10 x 8 in.
Courtesy of the artist and
Andrew Kreps Gallery
Photo: Jamie Isenstein

p. 85
Smoking Pipe (Version 2), 2006
Pipe, wooden table, humidifier, electric wiring, glue, enamel
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery
Photo: Thomas Müller

p. 86-87
Fire (Straw with elbow), 2010
Porcelain straw, glass bottle, wick, fuel, fire
10 x 2.5 x 2.5 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Lisa Cooley Gallery, New York
Photo: John Berens

100 Year Calendar, 2008
Cotton rag paper, archival ink, glue, archival board
10 x 10 x 9.25 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe/Berlin, Germany
Photo: David Hanauer

Rug Woogie V, 2011
Performance on guitar with yarn
Courtesy of the artist and Etc. Galerie, Prague, Czech Republic
Photo: JiĎí Thýn

p. 89
Infinite Invisible Soft-shoe, 2004
Installation view, Guild and Greyshkul, New York
Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Jamie Isenstein

p. 90
Inside Out with Jamie Isenstein (Press shot), 2004
Framed black and white photograph
8 x 10 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Jamie Isenstein

p. 90
The Egress, 2007
Bird costume (feathers, fake fur, fabric, buttons, acrylic paint, glue), artist or wood frame, gold enamel, picture lamp, red velvet curtain, "Gone Fishing" sign
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and The Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
Photo: Brian Forrest

p. 92
Magic Lamp, 2005
Plaster, gold leaf finish, epoxy, magic light bulb, arm with hand or "Will Return" sign, and velvet curtain
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Herman Feldhaus

p. 96
Untitled (Victorian mask with eye cut-outs, blue bonnet), 2013
Watercolor and pencil on paper
12 x 16 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Thomas Müller

p. 98-99
Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug, 2009
Bear, sheep, wolf, rug, woman or "Will Return" sign
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe/Berlin, Germany
Photo: Trevor Lloyd

p. 100-101
Empire of Fire, 2010
Installation views and detail, Meyer Reigger, Karlsruhe, Germany
Courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe/Berlin, Germany
Photo: David Hanauer

p. 103
The Egressess, 2007
Door, two peep holes
80 x 30 x 1 3/8 in.
Courtesy of the artist and The Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
Photo: Brian Forrest

p. 104
Untitled (Curtain), 2009
Curtains, curtain rod, intruder's legs or "Will Return" sign
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and The Kitchen, New York
Photo: Adam Reich

p. 106
Flowers of Evil (Hello Darkness), 2010
C-print
20 x 30 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Jamie Isenstein

p. 108
ROGER TOFTE
The Witch, The Enchanted Forest, Turner, Oregon
Photo: Stephanie Snyder

p. 112
The Egress, 2007
Bird costume (feathers, fake fur, fabric, buttons, acrylic paint, glue), artist or wood frame, gold enamel, picture lamp, red velvet curtain, "Gone Fishing" sign
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and The Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
Photo: Brian Forrest

p. 115
Invisible Disco Soft-shoe, 2004
(detail) Installation view, Guild and Greyshkul, New York
Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York
Photo: Jamie Isenstein

Jamie Isenstein

Born 1975, Portland, Oregon, USA
Lives and works in New York City

EDUCATION

2002–2004 MFA, Columbia University, New York, NY
1994–1998 BA, Reed College, Portland, OR

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2011 " ", Visual Arts Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX
Double Feature! Empire of Fire and Rug Woogie IV, Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe, Germany
Special Guest Rug Woogies, Etc. Galerie, Prague, Czech Republic
2010 *House of Hot*, Michael Benevento, Los Angeles, CA
" ", Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, NY
2007 *Acéphal Magical*, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, NY
Hammer Projects: Jamie Isenstein: This Way to the Egress, Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Culture Center, Los Angeles, CA
2006 *Quiet Manor*, Galerie Giti Nourbakhsch/ Meyer Riegger Galerie, Berlin, Germany
Flicker, Meyer Riegger Galerie/ Galerie Giti Nourbakhsch (project), Karlsruhe, Germany
2004 *Infinite Invisible Soft-shoe*, Guild and Greyshkul, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2013 *Champs Elysées*, curated by Julie Boukobza, Simon Castets, and Nicola Trezzi, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France
Die gestundete Zeit, curated by Gesine Borcherdt, Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf, Germany
2012 *Family Jewels*, curated by Cleopatras, Family Business Gallery, New York, NY
MakeUp, curated by Mariuccia Cassadio, A Palazzo Gallery, Brescia, Italy
It is what it is. Or is it?, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX
2011 *Museion: The Reed College Art Collection, One Hundred Years of Generosity*, curated by Stephanie Snyder, Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, Portland, OR
Les amis de mes amis sont mes amis, hommage à Ján Mančuška, Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, Paris, France
Heads with Tails, Harris Lieberman, New York, NY
Alice Channer, Jamie Isenstein, and J. Parker Valentine, Lisa Cooley Gallery, New York, NY
2010 *Touched*, Tate Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool, UK
The Pipe and the Flow, Galería Espacio Minimo, Madrid, Spain
Look Again, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC
Out of Joint, Galerie Kamm, Berlin, Germany

In Here, Laurel Gitlen Gallery, New York, NY
50 Artists Photograph the Future, Higher Pictures, New York, NY
Reel Subjects, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, NY
100 Years (version #2), PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY

2009 *Real Time, Real Documents*, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK
Marina Abramović Presents, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester International Festival, Manchester, UK
Je est un autre, Meyer Riegger Galerie, Berlin, Germany
One Minute More, The Kitchen, New York, NY
On From Here, Guild and Greyshkul, New York, NY

2008 *NOW: Selections from the Ovitz Family Collection*, Arizona State University Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ
Countdown, CCS Bard Hessel Museum, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
Second Thoughts, CCS Bard Hessel Museum, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
Funny Not Funny, Bellwether Gallery, New York, NY
The Influence of Fish Tails on the Breaking Waves, Point B Special Projects, New York, NY
200597214100022008, Small A Projects, New York, NY
Intimacy, The Fireplace Project, East Hampton, NY
Mysteries, Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Tales of the Grotesque, Karma International, Zurich, Switzerland
Thanks for Coming!!, Michael Benevento, Los Angeles, CA
Unfinished Room, Unit B, San Antonio, TX

2007 *Don't Look: Contemporary Drawings from an Alumna's Collection (Martina Yamin, class of 1958)*, Davis Museum at Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA
Humor's Lines, Maier Museum of Art, Randolph-Macon Woman's College, Lynchburg, VA

2006 *Green Light Green Light*, Small A Projects, Portland, OR
Just Off Focus, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, NY
Mid-Life Crisis, Salander-O'Reilly, New York, NY
The Presence of Absence, Gallery W52, New York, NY
it is, "what is it?," Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, NY

2005 *General Ideas*, curated by Matthew Higgs, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, CA
Greater New York 2005, PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York
Entdecken und Besitzen (Discovery and Ownership: Insights into Austrian Private Collections), Museum Moderner Kunst, Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna, Austria
Performa 05 Biennial, New York, NY
The General's Jamboree, Guild and Greyshkul, New York, NY
Bebe Le Strange, D'Amelio Terras Gallery, New York, NY
It'll Cost You …, curated by Beth Rudin DeWoody, Kathleen Cullen Fine Art, New York, NY

On Stage, Galerie Giti Nourbakhsch, Berlin, Germany
We Disagree, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, NY

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Singer, Debra. "Jamie Isenstein." In *Creamier: Contemporary Art in Culture: 10 Curators, 100 Contemporary Artists, 10 Sources*. Phaidon Press.
Velasco, David. "Jamie Isenstein." *Artforum*, May.
Yablonsky, Linda. "Artifacts: Jamie Isenstein's " "." *T Magazine*, February 26.

2009 "Artists Dictionary: Jamie Isenstein." *Flash Art*, January/February.
Douglas, Sarah. "Matt Keegan in New York." *Artinfo.com*, March 6.
"Goings On About Town: One Minute More." *New Yorker*, November 2.
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2008 Casadio, Mariuccia. "Self Exposure." *Vogue Italia*. January.
de Bellis, Vincenzo. "La (In)sicurezza Degli Oggetti." *Flash Art Italy*, August–September.
Jetzer, Gianni. "Tales of the Grotesque." *Karma International*, Zurich, Switzerland.
Marshall, Piper. "To the Egress." *Art Papers*, September/October.

2007 Baker, R. C. "Jamie Isenstein." *Village Voice*, September 25.

Chamberlain, Colby. “Critics Picks: Jamie Isenstein.” *Artforum.com*.
Coburn, Tyler. “Preview: Jamie Isenstein at Andrew Kreps / Hammer Museum.” *Art Review*, September.
Dreishpoon, Doug, ed. *Humor’s Lines*. Maier Museum of Art, Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, Lynchburg, VA.
Falconer, Morgan. “Jamie Isenstein.” *Frieze.com*, September 9.
Goldberg, RoseLee, ed. Performa: New Visual Art Performance. *Performa*, New York, NY.
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Row, D. K. “Shows of Note.” *Oregonian*, November 24.
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2005 Amy, Michael. “Jamie Isenstein at Guild and Greyshkul.” *Art in America*, January.
Biesenbach, Klaus, ed. *Greater New York 2005*, PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY.
Cotter, Holland. “We Disagree.” *New York Times*, February 4.
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Contributors

Graham Jones is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. After majoring in general literature at Reed College (class of '97), he earned a Ph.D. in anthropology from New York University and was a postdoctoral member of the Princeton University Society of Fellows. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in France, his book *Trade of the Tricks*: *Inside the Magician's Craft* (University of California Press, 2011) describes how a delicate skein of personal relationships and unspoken expectations governs the circulation of secrets as intellectual property in the insular subculture of entertainment magic. Focusing on forms of performance that blur boundaries between enchantment and disenchantment, Jones has also written about intercultural magic performances in colonial contact zones, and the appropriation of secular magic by evangelical Christian conjurers.

Stephanie Snyder is the John and Anne Hauberg Director and Curator of the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, a position she has held since 2003. A graduate of Reed College and Columbia University, Snyder is the curator of numerous exhibitions, including: *Kara Walker, More & Less* (2012); *Bruce Nauman, Basements* (2012); *Interior Margins* (2011); *Terry Winters: Linking Graphics* (2010); *David Reed, Lives of Paintings* (2008); and *Sutapa Biswas: Birdsong* (2006). In 2007, Snyder received a Curatorial Research Fellowship from the Getty Foundation. She is a regular contributor to *Artforum.com*. She lives in Portland, Oregon with her husband Jonathan and son Theo, and was once kissed by Joey Ramone.

David Velasco is editor of *Artforum.com* and a regular contributor to *Artforum*.

Heather Watkins is a designer and artist. A graduate of Pitzer College and the Rhode Island School of Design, Watkins has been designing books, objects, and printed matter for the past fifteen years for clients including The Ellie Caulkins Opera House, Denver, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. As a practicing artist, Watkins has exhibited her work widely at institutions and art spaces, including: the lumber room, The Portland Art Museum, and Lewis & Clark College. In 2012–13, she received grants from the Oregon Arts Commission, The Ford Family Foundation, and the Regional Arts and Culture Council to nurture the evolution of her work. Watkins is represented by PDX Contemporary Art, Portland, Oregon.

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Stephanie Snyder
John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director, Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery

Colophon

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