YOU CAN EAT OFF THE COUNTER I WIPED IT DOWN THIS MORNING

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Bachelor of Arts, Dartmouth College, 2008

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Virginia Commonwealth University
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ABSTRACT

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By Jessica Kain, MFA

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Alternative to meeting a calculus of quality roundness and curves are everywhere. Peaches, pinks, browns, ochres, greens. Klein Blue. ---------- An experiment like a party; the hows and whys of picking bedfellows yields a list of possibilities— iterations of better, advantages in flesh volume. Inventory whittled down to give us stories, aspirations, allegiances. -------- Just to see it and touch it. Build in different ways, depending. Grow, cover, carve, cast—let for flexibility. Limbs in one direction sawed off, turned round, glued back on. If it looks like two more ways of how I want it there’s more work to be done.
i.

Things get made— has everything to do with starting and stopping, but firstly has to do with wanting to see it. It starts with fantasy, with me busy, recombining familiar things, straddling expectations.

Working like this, I lose steam pretty fast. Soon the object has to insist on being.

If a thing in the studio looks like it could be in one or two other ways it's not doing much. I want to believe it, that it has motivations, pressures, allegiances, capacity— explicit or not.

The work mostly needs me to watch for changing conditions—to put down what occurs to the mind at the same time the mind sees it. Guston says this is the third hand at work. I understand it as presence.

And if I do this good work of presenceing I don't see myself. This is critical— what gets made is not me, it moves through me. And as forms are made so are pathways for more doing, and it is this that creates coherence.
ii.

But there's a lot of deception in the studio—in a process with no fixed course it gets slippery. At its ugliest is has me trying to summon presence, and what I risk is the arbitrary.

Discontent is a ranger here. It is very old. It's the second idea in the universe. The first was to be in relation to another. Before that there were no edges, there was nothing.

Once there became a here and a there all matter of identity and comparison was possible. If I'm starving here and it doesn't faze me—end of story. But if starving here rubs me bad I'll change my approach, risk dying to the turn the circumstances.

Discontent is aligned with survival. It doesn't give a stitch about idea, expectation, rules, parameters, logic, illogic. It is in the service of the relevant, and seeks balance, but does not preclude dissonance.
There are two things I can make—there are open systems and there are closed systems.

In the world of objects closed systems have to do with the monument, the artifact, the pedestal and the frame. Open systems are nearer to the basket, the stool, the mountain, the accessible body. Moving between these things there's not much accident, this is what we have. But not all things are strictly one or the other.

Bernini carved those marble fingers into that marble thigh and to see this in person I forget about Pluto and Persephone, and all I register is how one's flesh can distort that of another, how form can mold form. I can really get into this—I know how to get grabbed, to pull away and feel my edges barely discreet.

Making becomes closed when all its parts lead you to a single reading. What keeps an artwork open is a kind of democratic focus, or rather when all components are “maximally excited” so that it exceeds but doesn't abandon the arguments absorbed into its dimensions.
iv.

Names are important to me. I want to have the thing and the name, and if there isn't a name the idea of a name. Things that can have names are like masks—you know how to put it on, how to get into it, but then it shapes how you do.

Seeing means motion. It is in form and the words that form suggests where artist and viewer both see and are aware of seeing. And in this way, before either of us asks what a thing is we first acknowledge that it is.

This is an important ordering, otherwise things become just stuff to name—this kind, that kind, “I have a grandpa.”
History enters my studio as a noun amongst many. It comes in and moves around to sit in every groove, lays on all my rendered surfaces and fingers creases and indents looking for a fit.

Art “is not a fixture it is an activity.”\textsuperscript{vi} And you and me, we have to sweat to understand its dynamics, asking “how, where, and why the [artwork] moves, what are the types, directions, number, and velocities of a work’s motion.”\textsuperscript{vii}

I ask similar questions of myself—of my body and how I think. It’s useful for me to have names, an identity for these things— and also incredibly helpful for me to accept change, to recalibrate my language when discrepancies occur.

It is a peculiar set of values, an economy I can’t settle in, that imposes a linear project, prescribes a singular pleasure, and is faithful to only one discourse.\textsuperscript{vii}

Yet this is what we do— try to "join words to the world to close the gap between ourselves and things."\textsuperscript{ix} And usually, instead of getting nearer to the thing in front of us, we inch closer to understanding the limits of the imagination that so badly wants to know what it describes.\textsuperscript{x}
vi.

Accident is mostly a myth. There are no geologic accidents; catastrophes and cataclysms are born.

Sculptures fall over, buckle under their own weight, peel, molt, splinter, crack, become brittle, stay wet, change color, shelter bugs, feed mice, trap dust, rust, come loose, get stripped. Parts are left out in the rain, cuts mismeasured, and ratios blundered so a mixture won't cure. These are not accidental problems, these are systemic risks.

Real processes are happening in the studio daily where forms are grown, extruded, accreted, cut, grafted, imprinted, sun baked, and melted.

In failing to match histories to objects, these things start to show us their feathers— their structure and distinction, the integrity and separateness they've carved out in our world.\textsuperscript{x}

Curiosity is the object of my desire, a pleasure that articulates possibility, turning “incompleteness to speculation, and vastness into plentitude.”

To honor this darling I build flexibilities into objects, like leaving extra fabric at the seam— I want the option to let something out once I've already taken it in.

I've made a lot of things that are a kind of open you can't get into or use but pull at your strings to say, settle your rump in this groove, ready yourself the shaft of this rod is a kind of thick that takes two hands to hold.

Customs here are perforated. Like meeting a doorknob at head height and recognizing you can pull the size of your mouth around the bulb, brass clacking molars, cool against your gums.
Fantasy and presence are a braided thing. Mine is a dance of entertaining alternatives, where daily I ask, what does it cost to keep enough ignorance to see forms as they emerge?

I have to be generous— to quiet the rage to know and be grateful for the premonitions in form. Because it will tell— about relationships known and unknown, aggressive pressures and elegant articulations, the hows and whys of teeth, whiskers, nipples and nails.

The body tells us a lot, it did after all figure out how to do it— to get made; to advance two by two, touching, impressed, looking and hearing, feeling in those ways the heart strings, the crotch strings—it uses these things as material for a body of needs, wiggly and waistless, to find legs with hips and a common trunk.
I've learned about myself. I'm not satisfied, content with my body until I've touched every part of a sculpture. Like offspring, their bodies are open to me—front, back, inside, outside, top and underneath, until inevitably I'm built out of their intimate spaces.

My best happiness is here, after struggling— to turn, tired, adrenaline spent, and see a crescent when I now the thing is full.
ENDNOTES


iv Ibid. p368

v Ibid. p.2

vi Ibid. p.371

vii Ibid.

viii Ibid. (Luce Irigaray quoted by Hejinian) p.369

ix Ibid. p376

x Ibid. p372

xi Ibid. p376

xii Ibid. p371

Thesis Exhibition:
MEANWHILE CRUSHINGCIRLCES

Meanwhile, 2012
crushingcircles, 2012
VITA

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EDUCATION

2012 Virginia Commonwealth University – MFA Sculpture + Extended Media, Richmond, VA
2008 Dartmouth College – B.A. Studio Art, Anthropology, Hanover, NH

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2012 Graduate Research Grant, Virginia Commonwealth University
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