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ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

JESSE STECKLOW

Jesse Stecklow entwines biography and biometrics in “Terminal”

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Jesse Stecklow says he began planning “Terminal” at Mumok in Vienna in 2018. You could also say he started making it in 2014, the year he first installed an air sampling tube in an aluminum filter casing and called it a sculpture. This first Air Sampler work returns at Mumok, as do several subsequent versions, their passive analysis of the art-space atmosphere housed in clocks and freestanding vents. Stecklow was part of The Jogging (2009–2014), an influential post-net collective founded on the associative logic of the endless scroll—no surprise, then, that his most complete survey to date, on view through September 25, is just as addictively unspooled.

THIS PARTICULAR SPACE in the museum doesn’t have natural light. It reminded me of these airport-type environments that you’re filtered through. The title “Terminal” emerged from that, but the show became more about various time lines, something unending or continuous, or moving toward this unknown but certain end point, like a terminal disease.

Visitors can hear the space before they see it. Right inside the glass doors, there’s a spinning box shaped like the gallery space itself, with a ball that strikes the sides with a rhythm derived from the outline of the room. There’s also a tapping machine, which is a device used to measure the acoustic insulation of spaces in a building. Every fifteen minutes it taps out a rhythm on the floor. It also resembles a piece of luggage. In the main part of the space, there are long, rounded forms that act as center dividers on each of the four tables, perhaps referencing the circular movement of a baggage carousel. They’re speakers—I’m calling them Sound Stanchions. The tapping machine does its thing, and then a four-channel sound work made from recordings of the tapping machine plays over the stanchions in response.

There are lots of ears in the show. The ear scanner piece came out of thinking about how, while we’re in transit or searching or accessing information, in both physical and online spaces, we’re asked to give a little bit of ourselves away. We’re not often aware of where that information is going. The piece is a little paper box on the wall and visitors can press their ear against it and it makes a scan that goes into a larger database that is an ongoing part of my work. The ear images trickle onto a screen attached to another



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sculpture, one of the *Ear Wigglers*. There's a biometric aspect to the work, for sure. But also, we rarely see our own ears. People sometimes try to find their ears in the images and guess that other people's ears are theirs. On either side of a tabletop hanging by the entrance are these fossils from a whale's inner ear. They've heard many things in their lifetime. It struck me that you could go up and tell your deepest, darkest secret to this stone ear and it would give you no signs that it had retained that information. Perhaps in this moment there's comfort in being able to confide in an inanimate object.



The ears came out of a long chain of associations that starts with the air sampling works I began to make in 2013. The sampler itself is this small metal tube that fits within the housing that is the sculpture. After each exhibition, the air sampler is capped and sent to a lab, and I receive a list of all these materials they find. I was finding a lot of byproducts of corn processing, like ethanol or acetic acid. It felt logical, given that we subsidize corn production so heavily in the United States: It's in our food; it's in the feed we give the animals we eat; it's in gasoline; it's in our infrastructure. There's a piece called *From Ear to Ear*, from 2009, on the second table that has a screen print of some of the air sampler data on it. It's got a dried corn cob next to moonshine made

from corn. Then you have acetic acid, an oxidized form of the corn-based alcohol. And then you have these eardrops that use acetic acid as the primary ingredient. This material lineage traces a linguistic association. The sculpture is learning from itself and from other objects around it. Perhaps that's the data-driven aspect of my work, these feedback loops where the sculptures internalize their histories and use that to draw new iterations of themselves.

In 2014, I was becoming a little more comfortable with putting personal narratives into the work. My grandfather was a sculptor. I grew up spending summers in his studio. He was able to wiggle his ears, which I'm not able to do—it's such a quintessential grandparent thing. I visited him in the hospital when I was ten or eleven, before he passed away, and I made a drawing of his ear. My parents saved that. Eventually I began redrawing this ear of his. And so these Ear Wiggler sculptures—these canisters from an air duct fan, which have an ear drawing mounted to the outside, and then an ear of corn skewered on this motor peg that spins and wiggles every four and a half minutes for thirty seconds—those pieces were born from both an output of the air sampling work and a personal rumination on my grandfather's personality.

The work is this sort of continuous, open-ended time line that engages ideas around simultaneity that feel very present, the way we can see several examples of the same kind of object around us in different states of deterioration or function. In 2019, I did this show in Berlin at Sweetwater gallery, an apartment space that had two side-by-side rooms. I essentially installed the same type of work in the same place in each room, like perhaps these works were in multiple places at once. I did something similar last year at Banbridge House in Princeton over three rooms. So the Mumok show includes these four table forms. Each table has both new and old sculptures on it, but they plot a sort of time line or moment within my work—the fourth table is the present, as it were. It's my own working toward the show within the show.

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