



INTERVIEW

Anna
Sew Hoy
& Rita
Gonzalez



1. Nancy Grossman, *Ali Stoker*, 1966-1967, mixed media, detail, collection of Michael Rosenfeld and Halley K. Harrisburg, New York

Anna Sew Hoy This is the work Nancy Grossman was making just before she started her famous heads.¹ I relate to the way she sexualizes the everyday things—leather jackets and car parts—by entangling them and splaying them out. She capitalizes on their inherent parts; the zipper or pocket of the jacket becomes a place for a rubber hose to be inserted.

Rita Gonzalez In the literature on her work there is frequent use of words like binding, masking, obscuring—the trauma, whether personal or historical, emerges out of her post-war generational experience of political, historical, and personal violence. I don't see the same concerns in your use of materials. Even though they are put under tension, they are not trying to convey a bound body or constrained body, or a trapped or imprisoned body.

ASH I am aggressive with clay. I gouge and rip it. The gouges in the clay slabs are a record of my action. I think of the Gutai Group meditating for hours before an empty canvas until suddenly getting



2. *Fist*, Two Serious Ladies, 2008

up to cover it in a sweeping attack. But on the whole my clay “bodies” are more optimistic. The orbs are a space, a room, a place where something happens or something grows, a pregnant body. The bodies are styled. They are clothed by and made up of the clutter around us. Sometimes the body is the empty space amongst the clutter. My work is generative. I am interested in making bodies, making space.

RG You have in many ways drawn attention to the performative aspect of ceramics through your collaborations with Flora Wiegmann and Eve Fowler. You find ways to enact and give dimension to the works. Is it your hand in the photo that Eve took of the fist in the clay?²

ASH Yes.

RG I think of it now having just seen Mapplethorpe's photograph *Helmut and Brooks*, N.Y.C. (1978) here at LACMA.

ASH That's the first picture that Eve and I took where we said: “this is it.”



3. *Planets Making Planets* with Math Bass and Claire Kohne, *A LAND Program: Nomadic Nights* at Human Resources, Los Angeles, 2013

We made a few different things that were okay, but we were still reaching around in the dark, looking for what we wanted to do together. But once we made that image, we knew. Eve loved how iconic it was, the solidarity fist, the symbol of Black Power and feminist movements. And for me, it shows how my body meets the clay and how that can become sexualized.

My work in clay requires a set of conscious and focused actions, the manipulation of limbs. I have to put my back into it. My interest in performance begins here, because I become so aware of my body while making sculpture. I'm wrestling with the clay and rolling it around and smacking it.³

RG I want to ask you about your work's relationship to costume and theatricality. If you look to Grossman and her use of costume, and even Bruce Conner and Robert Rauschenberg, there's still a lot of residue of a particular historical period—one marked by catastrophe. There's a completely different type of body that you are referencing that is



4. *arm hook / denim worm*, 2008, installation view, Leslie Fritz Gallery, New York, 2008

kind of synthetic, but also human, desiring but aggressive. It's more an abstracted, feline, shape-shifting form. For example, your invocation of Irma Vep in the installation *Irma Vep's Room*. I liken it to Yayoi Kusama's body—of unbridled energy—as opposed to a constricted one.⁴ I'm not sure how you feel about that, my connecting your work to Kusama's. Her work is about multiplication. I'm thinking about those jean works of yours.

ASH Today, our bodies have merged with our stuff. We cannot separate the two. The denim is our skin, and the cables are our antennae, our connection to the world. I use denim and cellphone cords to underscore the ubiquity of mass-produced articles created within a planned obsolescence. The earth is overpopulated with every cut of jean, and many versions of cell phone.

RG I heard on the radio coming over that the number of objects that an average American owns has tripled since the 1960s!

5. *Tissue Dispensing (tall)*, 2012

ASH Horrifying. When I think of multiplicity, I think of too much, of the overflowing everything drawer in the kitchen. Give me all the cords in your house which don't plug into anything anymore. Give me all the jeans from your closet which are last year's or last decade's cut. Electric cords create these amazing lines in space—3D lines, which fall to the ground. I love the kinks in the cords from where they are bent from being tied in a bundle at the factory. You don't have to tell them where to go, they just spill outwards. They offset the solidity of the ceramic. The tissues I use in my work do that as well.⁵ I like to have one part that isn't in control, that just falls or is unformed. Even with the ceramic shapes—I agree with your description of shape-shifting, because I don't use shapes that you can memorize. It's important to me with this work that you can't memorize the form.

RG They are faceted, but there is not a pure geometry. There is not really anything systematic about the structure, yet they still give the impression of being gem-like or of having some kind of

6. Auguste Rodin, *The Thinker*, 1902

regularity. You've said that you want them to look different as someone is walking around them, you want them to take on different forms or associations.

ASH I suppose I learned that from looking at Rodin—that the sculpture should be active as you walk around it.⁶ The profile changes infinitely, and with Rodin, it was probably that the profile should be resolved from every angle. In my work, the shape is the result of a physical process. I start with a large chunk of clay, which I paddle into a faceted form. I pick up the clay and drop it on the table to make a flat side. I pick it up and drop it again. I paddle it again. The shape evolves. When you walk around it, the facets appear and disappear like an irregular disco ball.

RG Pedestals also give structure to your work.

ASH They also say: this is a sculpture. Sometimes that fact has to be underlined because I often make functional objects. With the tissue-dispensing sculptures I wanted to make something

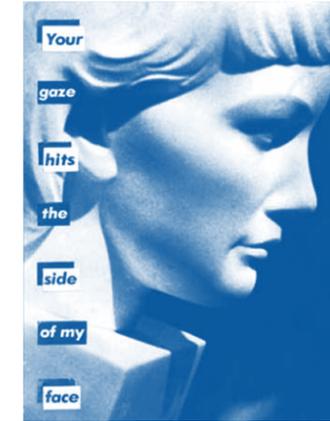
7. *Irma Vep's Room*, video still, Orange County Museum of Art, 2008

that has a daily life function but is readable as a sculpture. They are elevated to gallery-viewing height. Beyond that, I wanted to make the pedestals as minimal as possible.

What also excites me about the tissue-dispensing sculptures is the element of performance that we were discussing. Now anyone who is confronted with this sculpture can become the performer. The tissue sculpture transforms the act of grabbing a tissue into a conscious gesture. The tea ceremony is a highly fetishized series of actions, but it too begins with a simple act that gains significance by being framed. You take a moment to do this act with your whole being. That may be what I was trying to do with Flora in *Irma Vep's Room*.⁷ I was trying to make sculptures that make you self-conscious.

RG The mirrored pieces.

ASH Yes. When you feel self-conscious, you start acting. I feel like that particular piece, *Irma Vep's Room*, needed to be complicated because there were so

8. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)*, 1981

many different elements. There, the mirror is a lens that is watching you. I think of Barbara Kruger's piece *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)*, 1981. Women are especially conscious of being seen and watched. The viewer's reflection bounces around, and she tries to find a place to rest her own gaze. The tissue-dispensing sculptures are less about a feminist awareness of the gaze, and more about making the viewer perform, making the viewer interact with the sculpture, allowing the sculpture to become part of domestic life.

RG There should be a ritualistic space and a specialized object that's made to engage in that way. Can you go back and talk about some of your earliest work? Is there a point in time when the notion of action or performativity really became clear? What was the first sculpture you can remember making that you put down and realized that there was some implication of gesture?

ASH Jackie Winsor was a huge influence on me. I worked for her when I was in art school.



9. Jackie Winsor, *Brick Dome*, 1971
Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

RG I know her large wooden outdoor sculptures.

ASH She makes a lot of stuff, I have a catalogue here. See this large plank covered in nails hammered flush, or this large hemisphere that was bricked?⁹ She made that a couple of times for museums. It is a piece that needs to be made in one go, so to make it she and her assistants worked for 72 hours non-stop—three days straight. She's always trying to make a perfect object that has a perfect geometry. And I looked at those things a lot and I want to make a piece that has the same amount of power and endurance as a Jackie Winsor piece, but I'm not concerned with perfect geometry. I'm more concerned with imperfection.

This piece, *Kicking Piece*, I probably made around the time I was working for her.¹⁰ It is a soccer ball that is about 3 feet tall. A soccer ball has 56 pentagons and 64 hexagons, so I cut those out of chicken wire. Then I took red copper wire and stitched them all together and filled them with empty Sapporo beers



10. *Kicking Piece*, 2001

cans, because that's a material that I've used over and over again. I wanted to make this thing that was too big and too heavy. It makes a horrible sound when you kick it and also hurts your foot. It was really a get-out-your-aggression piece. It took six months to make.

RG Was it about a performance of strenuousness, physicality, and rigor, similar to how you describe Winsor's work?

ASH Yes. I almost gave myself carpal-tunnel syndrome making that piece. I was trying to make something that was too hard, spending every day of my entire winter semester at Hunter College obsessively weaving the chicken wire panels together. The result was a soccer ball so large and heavy that you had to kick it really hard to make it move, and ended up hurting your foot in the process, as well as making a horrible sound. The piece was about self-punishment, but it was also funny in a doomed kind of way.



11. Brooke Shields in Calvin Klein ad, circa 1980

RG A critic once wrote of your work in a slightly snarky way that it reminded them of Urban Outfitters—the jeans have this connection to youth culture or branded culture.

ASH I'm not at all bothered by that reading. Denim does have that connection. The critique was more about how I allow the associations to be so open. I choose not to be over-determined. Another critic argued that he could only think of construction workers when he saw the jeans, and nothing else. Jeans are as ubiquitous as water. Everyone in the world wears them except my dad. I think of their ubiquity and of one's close relationship with their own pair. Nothing gets between Brooke Shields and her Calvins.¹¹ With the trench coats, some people also think fashion.

RG Deconstructed fashion.

ASH Another artist remembered growing up in New York and seeing salary men lined up at the station waiting for the commuter train to the city. Some people think of flashers, and some



12. *Trench Coat (study)*, 2007

people think wardrobe staple. With these sculptures I allow for multiple associations. The trench coat is an iconic article that triggers many different ideas.¹²

RG I was also thinking about scale, because the orbs conjure the globe. A paradox exists within a representation of the world in its immensity, but as an object that one can hold in one's hands. This shape of the globe is one in which when we take it in our hands and stroke it or turn it, we are both thinking of something that is beyond our bodily knowledge (oceans, continents) and of something that we can grasp and play with and feel the surface of. Is that something that was going through your mind with this form?

ASH A globe is a model that represents the dimensions of Earth.¹³ It's an abstraction. These sculptures are not abstractions, because they are the result of specific physical actions and properties. The orbs are made by rolling the ball on a table and faceting them with a paddle, and then shaping



13. The Earth as seen from space.
Image courtesy NASA



15. *Blue Views*, 2010, installation view, *Holes*,
Sikkema, Jenkins & Co., New York, 2010

the interior space by carving it out. It's not accidental, but rather a process of getting the form to evolve over time. They are not representing anything else, so that's why they're the opposite of a globe. That said, the orbs are a model of a potential kind of space. Artist Erika Vogt named her show *Geometric Persecution* (2010), and that always stuck with me. Why are rooms built at right angles? Why are doors rectangles? I too feel persecuted by the grid. My sculpture creates other ideals of space.

RG Is the size determined by what you can hold and carry?

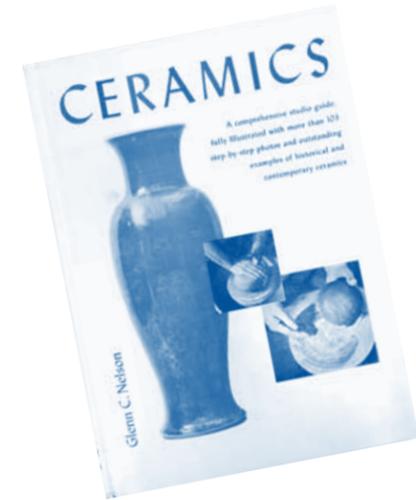
ASH They come from the largest ball of clay I can deal with when wet—about 125 pounds. I weigh 108. When scooped out and fired they are between 18 and 25 pounds.

RG I was looking at documentation of your show *Holes*, at Sikkema Jenkins, and I was struck by the piece with the two hands (*Blue Views*, 2010), which surprised me because I hadn't seen anything like that from you before.¹⁵

ASH That piece came from an accident. I was working on the orbs, and the question to solve was how to get them to viewing height. I thought to make a large forearm and hand that held it up. I had Taft Green weld the hand structure, and then I had to build the forearm underneath. The whole thing was fleshed out with a mixture of papier maché and clay. The problem is that I often cannot predict what the effect will be until I've actually gone through with the piece. Months later, I finally have the hand, and here's the dramatic moment when I put the orb in it for the first time. It's terrible because the orb in the palm of a hand becomes a precious jewel. Adding the hand also added a layer of the mythical, as if the hand belonged to a god. Preciousness and myth: the things I do not want. The orb never went on the hand again. Months later, I realized that the hand should stand on its own, and when I added another hand on top, they held a space that parallels the space inside the orbs. And that is what I was looking to highlight with the orbs—the space inside.



18. *Eden's Edge*, Hammer Museum, 2007,
installation view, detail of "the deck"



16. Glenn C. Nelson, *Ceramics*, 1960

RG Thinking more about a broader timeline of your exhibitions, I wanted you to talk about a transformation I see between the *Eden's Edge* installation and what you showed in the two manifestations of *Irma Vep's Room/Look-See*. I see a clear transformation in the design, construction, and display from the former to the latter.

ASH My installation in *Eden's Edge* had two sides: a formal sculptural presentation a la Brancusi-at-the-MOMA, and then *Blacknoir*, which was a showroom presentation of an idealized domestic scene that showed the artworks in their relaxed, at home state. The table that the pieces sat on was intended to conjure a vision of a coffee table. However, it had to be roomy enough to fit many vessels and small sculptures. It ended up being 6 x 7 feet. We called it "the deck."¹⁸

Ceramics were a gateway for me to allow life to enter my work. The history of ceramics has much in common with the history of art, but it is also quite separate.¹⁹ Original clay objects

were vessels to hold food. The longer I worked in clay, the more I needed to acknowledge the history and unique identity of clay. My artwork began to span the divide between functional object and "art idea" more and more. And when my objects became functional, art was a frame for the rituals of home life, and then it encompassed my personal friendships with My Barbarian, Lara Schnitger, A.L. Steiner, Eve Fowler, and D'Argento. These artistic collaborations were built of much conversation, as well as political and performative action.

RG I see the work of that period starting to let in this array of experiences and conversations. The shift was really how your objects could be placed and activated within and by this transdisciplinary group of friends and collaborators.

ASH *Irma Vep's Room* (2008) began as a performance with sculptural props. These sculpture-props are sturdy and on wheels, so they can be moved, danced with, sat upon, looked into and through. When they come to rest in the



17. *Irma Vep's Room*, Orange County Museum of Art, 2008, installation view

gallery as an installation after the initial performance is over, it is an installation in which the viewer is actively moving through space, creating her path between the objects that reflect and absorb their gaze and movement.¹⁷ Walking through the room becomes a conscious act. Watching other people move through the room becomes a game of spying them through the metal hoops and seeing their fractured bodies in the mirrors and holes. With *Irma Vep's Room*, sculpture can be the main event, but it is also supplemental to my collaboration with Flora, K8 Hardy and Giles Miller, and to bodies in movement, sound and personal interaction. *Irma Vep's Room*, in turn, paved the way for *Fertility Spell*, 2010, where my pregnant body became a metaphor for artistic inspiration and creation, and the objects really are just props and not sculpture at all.

RG In *Eden's Edge* your main consideration seemed to be where these sculptures are being exhibited—their placement—and beyond that of the location of ceramics within the sculptural



18. *Cogitate*, 2013. *Home Office*, Various Small Fires, Los Angeles, 2013, installation view

hierarchy. In *Irma Vep's Room* the consideration is not so much exhibition rubrics or the status of ceramics, but how an installation implicates the viewer/participant and the potential drama of these objects. The gallery was teeming with errant forms and wandering bodies who were either looking for or trying to avoid reflections. Both ultimately had a seductive quality, but in *Eden's Edge* the seduction was about the offerings on the “deck”—their allure as desirable objects. How have you conceived of the sculptures for your show at Various Small Fires? ¹⁸

ASH I presented the orbs as the central subject, after working on them for four years. There, I focused on exhibition display, taking cues from Comme des Garçons' Rei Kawakubo's recent museum show in Detroit, and from her various boutiques and pop-up shops. For example the celebrated Chelsea boutique is almost like a total art work, the way the architecture on the macro, and then shelving and lighting on the micro give context and frame around the clothing. All surfaces become information.



19. Comme des Garçons, Spring/Summer Collection 1997

It's dangerous to compare an art show to a shop, I realize, but perhaps the shop's information-overload is more interesting to think about than the pristine background that a gallery is supposed to provide.

RG The types of sculptures and assemblages we discussed at the outset of our conversation involved restrained or tortured bodies. I love your affinity for Rei Kawakubo and Comme des Garçons because in a way she is mapping those contorted and abject gestures back onto the body, merging the tactile, sculptural and fashion, but making them playful, absurd, and covetable (at least for some tastes!).

ASH Fashion is great because it allows you to perform your own body concept. It is a way to work against the conventions of how a body should look or act. My favorite clothes by Rei Kawakubo are her “tumor clothes” from 1997.¹⁹ They deform the body and make it hunchback, or cancerous. But the fabrics are bright red, green, and blue checks and plaids—very pop. I also



20. *Mental Beach*, 2013. *Home Office*, Various Small Fires, Los Angeles, 2013, installation view

think of the deep irony with which Riot Grrrls in the 1990s wore baby doll dresses from the 1960s.

Fashion is a language of signs that inspires my work. Beyond fashion, everyday clothing itself is an important material. The orbs are covered with worn denim as well as brand-new neoprene.²⁰ They wear their fabric skin like Maggie Cheung wears her catsuit in *Irma Vep*.

A disguise. Protection. Seduction.

