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CHANGE AGENTS — A Portfolio of Fifty Contemporary Artists

Plus: Conversations with Nicole Eisenman, Andrea Fraser, Saidiya Hartman, Arthur Jafa, Élisabeth Lebovici, Michelle Lopez, Liza Lou, Legacy Russell, Alison Saar, Betye Saar, Lezley Saar, Anna Sew Hoy, Shinique Smith, A.L. Steiner, Susan Unterberg, McKenzie Wark, and Jackie Winsor

LOVE GOES TO BUILDING

ON FIRE

JACKIE WINSOR, MICHELLE LOPEZ, and ANNA SEW HOY
in conversation with **ALEX KLEIN**

In January 2020, artists Jackie Winsor, Michelle Lopez, and Anna Sew Hoy gathered for a public conversation in Philadelphia. While Winsor is widely recognized for her striking and painstakingly produced sculptures, she is equally important as a pedagogue. Lopez and Sew Hoy, both former students of Winsor's, reflect on her influence on their individual processes as artists and how questions of gender within sculptural practice persist today.

The event was organized on the occasion of the exhibition *Michelle Lopez: Ballast & Barricades*, curated by Alex Klein at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania.
— AK

JACKIEWINSOR — I'm a sculptor. For those who may not know, I graduated (BFA) in painting in 1965. I then got a MFA in painting and drawing in the spring of 1967. Within days I moved to New York City and into my first solo studio on Mulberry Street. It was my second year of making sculpture and being a sculptor. From 1974 to the present I have taught at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in Manhattan and it was my pleasure to be faculty to Anna Sew Hoy (BFA) and graduate faculty to Michelle Lopez (MFA). Michelle and Anna got together on their own years later and had the common background experience of knowing me and having at different times been my students. Beyond that we all became sculptors and part of the larger art community.

I started out as a painter [and] what interested me was color and line. When I went to graduate school I started to make sculpture. I am also very physical and when I was an undergraduate I

walked four miles to school and four miles home every day. In the evening, just to calm down, I would go for a walk for another few miles. So there is a physicality in just about everything I did. And so, when people ask you, where do things come from? Well, they come from where your interest was before as it meandered into the moment.

I think making work is a great activity if you happen to be involved in it. It is an unknown activity—you push at what you do not know and try to figure out what to do next. After a while, you do enough of it so you begin to get a hint of what is going on. As a young person who ended up in art school—or wherever you went—you are accumulating enough experiences that you begin to see the reflection of yourself and what you are doing. It's an experience of getting to know yourself. And so where I come from in making things, the pieces, they are just all very *body*—your body and torso and



all those kinds of things and there's a lot of engagement in the body making them.

But all that stuff goes to something else. And that something else—where I would consider something finished—is when it found its own spot and was quiet. What I wanted is the thing that came to it, my own private experience, and it is there in the work as a kind of quietness. I have often thought of my finished pieces like a person sleeping in a room. They are there, they get up and move around, talk, eat, and do everything when they are up. But when they sleep they absorb the energy out of the room and you know there is a whole history there, existing in that potential state. In the pause. And you get the quietness of that. My interest has been to see and get to know people in this nonverbal hodgepodge way. And try to support what they are interested in—in any way I can. And sort of being the background for their foreground.

ANNA SEW HOY — Jackie was my teacher at SVA. I was also her archivist for about two years, around 1999–2000. I spent a lot of time in her loft on Mercer looking at slides, looking at four by fives and black and white prints of her work from the late 1960s, early '70s. Big tree parts, string binding it all, and endless nails pounded into it. And then into the '90s with her pigmented concrete works. I spent a lot of time with her, and with images of her work so I have absorbed it quite thoroughly. Jeffrey Deitch introduced Michelle Lopez and me in the basement of the New Museum—the old one on Broadway. And then it was like, “Do you want to come to my studio?” We decided to take the plunge.

MICHELLE LOPEZ — A part of it was that Anna was the only female sculptor. I think we were talking about sweatpants or something, but it was very clear you were a maker. So very quickly it was one of those moments

Winsor
1988
concrete
Winsor,
Paula Cooper
New York

where we decided we were friends and that we would develop this sculpture relationship, which I think is really rare. I studied with Jackie in grad school from 1992 to 1994, and then I actually taught with Jackie much later in the same graduate program. But, yes, I had come to SVA, which is where Jackie has taught for forty-five years. I was an undergrad at Barnard in the art history program and Jackie offered this whole other discourse involving shamans and gurus. She had this kind of warrior way of making work that was really inspiring, especially being a woman. I was drawn into that radical way of thinking.

ALEX KLEIN — Which is interesting because, Jackie, you were talking about your own trajectory as a maker and growing up in Newfoundland helping your dad fix your house—it suggests another way of internalizing “making.” And the other day Michelle, Anna, and I were talking about how we are somehow still fighting with the legacy of minimalism and a male-dominated narrative of modernist sculpture. But of course there other roadmaps for histories of abstraction and other ways of thinking about the grid that are not so rigid, but are maybe more soft—for example, Hilma af Klint, the Gee’s Bend quilters, Ruth Asawa. And I have in mind this great Kirk Varnedoe quote, that Jackie’s sculptures are “math made into mantra,” which I thought was a beautiful description.

JACKIE — I’d like to go back and address a question often asked: “Where do things and ideas and incentive come from?” My impulse is to say, “From everywhere and no where.” They come from the outer environment mixed with the inner environment and where your focus takes light. It’s what captivates your spirit as you play your way into adulthood. My dad was in New York City one month before I was born. He had a photo taken while in the city for his passport. He worked on a commercial trading vessel out of Saint John, Newfoundland, with stops all the way up and down the Atlantic coast from Saint John to Rio de Janeiro and all the ports in between. He was employed by the American “homeland security”—it was World War II—keeping an eye out for submarines, etc. He was on his way home in time for my birth. That side of my family tree had wandering in their blood. When I was around four years old we immigrated

to mainland Canada. After arriving in New Brunswick, Mom and the kids took a train to Boston and stayed with an aunt while my Dad found a house for us to live in. We lived in Saint John for six months and then moved to Digby, Nova Scotia. We were there less than a year and then back to Saint John. By the time I was eleven we had immigrated to the United States and I had lived in, I believe, thirteen houses, one of which I was born in—while dad was still finishing building it—and three others where there was a lot of rebuilding going on.

Are you getting the idea? My experience was a lot of loss, a lot of the unknown, and the fun thing was the building. I seemed to gravitate toward the physical.

When I first came to New York, I could not identify two women artists and I grew up in a family of women, and I was missing them, right? I was a year or two out of school when the women’s movement became prevalent in the art community. It came out of a coalition and antiwar politics. Those particular women artists that were supportive of that, all of a sudden we’re having meetings in lofts. So we talked about—you probably all know Judy Chicago—we would have these discussions at these gatherings that we would have once every month, every few weeks. I somehow intuitively found the sculptors, because they were makers, right? And there is a kind of groundedness in them. I did not identify very much with a lot of the dialog that went on around feminism in the early years because I grew up in the country in Canada. I was on the ocean. There were all women in the house and my sisters and my mother did the house things. I got to be the one that did the hard work outside. I would carry the water, took out the chamber pots, chopped the wood. I did all those kinds of things. I didn’t have this domesticated sense of what anybody should be.

And so, when we moved to the States, I didn’t fit in particularly. What sort of surfaced as a thought process after a while was my training; it prepared me to work hard. I wasn’t going to make any work that was too easy. The stereotypes did not fit so I went my own way. You are shaped by your life, right? And so you are your material—you find other things there to work with, but you are that. I knocked the

Where do things and ideas and incentive come from? My impulse is to say, “From everywhere and no where.” They come from the outer environment mixed with the inner environment and where your focus takes light.
— Jackie Windsor

Following Jackie Windsor

Nail Piece, 1991
Wood and nails

7 x 82 x 8 in.

Collection: Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA
Photo: Andrew Mates, Pittsburgh
© Jackie Windsor
Courtesy: Pittsburgh Gallery, New York

nails out of the wood and helped my father hammer them up. There was no wrapping in my childhood, as much as people keep saying. But I was interested in drawing. And wrapping is drawing, around and around. What you bring to it, where my interest was—bicep muscles, the muscular—you bring out these shapes of energy compressed. And words you use are the poetry that holds an experience. But it is not just wrapping; no, you are drawing and drawing out energy. When you do that you put your body energy in there and it is encased in that drawing. What I was interested in with *Bound Logs* is I wanted to have the strength of the convexness of the hardwood trunks. So I actually wrapped it twice.

ANNA — The 21-year-old me was appalled when Jackie told me that in order to make her work she had to make the sculptures not one time but twice, usually, sometimes more. I was like, that is so much work! How could she ever do that? Now I understand after making my own work for over twenty years. Make it the first time to create the process and make it again to execute it with intention. And if you don't get it right, make it again.

JACKIE — The first time I wrapped that it didn't have energy in it. It was just wrapping, you had to put the energy in it. And I figured out how to do it and I pulled it apart and put it back together. So it is drawing and it is drawing energy.

MICHELLE — I think that is specific to sculpture in terms of the evidence of that process. That energy, I think, is so specific but also elusive. Jackie, you were talking about the sleeping person absorbing the things around you. That was such a nice metaphor for thinking about sculpture. Sculpture is this living, breathing thing when the maker is actively in it and moving the material around. It does have that relationship to drawing. How does the work suddenly have presence and energy, like you were talking about? Or can you dissect that intuitively, like when you say this is energy and this is not? Is it in relationship to the body being present in a very specific way?

JACKIE — You know, I am a fairly intuitive person. I'm not subject to going up to somebody and giving a full body hug. If they are into it they give you a good hug back. And I want a good hug

back, right?

ALEX — Jackie, you have this wonderful phrase you use when talking about your work, that it is like "dropping anchors" because, *boom*, there it is. I think that speaks to the amount of concerted energy and effort that goes into each of your works and the deliberateness of your practice.

JACKIE — When I work with an idea long enough, I work it to bring it to what I wanted. And then it is there. It is some little snapshot of me when I was sixteen or something. I am not it anymore; it is there and I have a lot of relationship with it. They mark out periods in your life.

ANNA — The more I worked with material, the more I became aware of my own body—these are my arms, warm after working with clay. Here are my wrists, so sore after twisting this wire over and over. I noticed as my body made specific, repeated actions in order to create a sculpture. So the action became louder, and my body performing these precision actions increasingly became my work and my process. And that is how I ended up doing more performance—through the act of making sculpture.

ALEX — How do you determine your forms?

ANNA — From pushing material around. It is a lot about moving my material, looking at what it did, and responding to that. My husband plays saxophone, and when he talks about improvisation, I see a lot of parallels between him finding the next notes to play and me taking another step in the studio. I don't have a form in my head when I am starting with material. I find the form through moving the material around and being inspired by what it does. Especially clay, which is the main material I have been using over the past two decades. Clay inspires me in all that it does—it slumps, it cracks, it starts very soft and sticky, and then it gets hard and rigid, and all these changing qualities propel me towards a form.

Also, I think a lot about how I might make something that points to the fact that we spend our lives in box-shaped rooms and buildings—there's 90 degree angles everywhere, and what is this doing to us—how does it pre-deter-

mine our thought and movement? I use sculpture as a way to imagine another space. My orb forms create an interior space that I'd love to live in or think into. My public sculpture *Psychic Body Grotto* [in Los Angeles State Historic Park] is made of three intersecting arches, which create a structure for ritual that has yet to be determined. The intention is for others to make it function how they see fit. People meet under it for sunset conversation, people place circles of rocks inside.

ALEX — Anna has said that the grid is a prison and Jackie has referred to it as a fishing net. This goes back to my earlier point about finding other trajectories for abstraction or the grid. We've previously talked about Agnes Martin—who Jackie also knew in person. I've been thinking about the way Martin looked to the landscape to create another kind of grid that is organic and tethered to the body. If you look at her paintings the grids are not quite perfect, they are hand-drawn lines. Anna, I know you are personally interested in these other kinds of spaces and figures like Emma Kunz. It is interesting to think about what you were saying earlier about your interest in the blob versus this idea of the grid as a kind of prison—which I think refers both to the grid as actual form as well as the politics that it conjures. One might observe that you've managed to subvert the grid by making these supposed opposites come together in unexpected ways.

MICHELLE — I think the blob thing is interesting in relation to sculpture. Because we associate ourselves with this monolithic thing, I am trying to understand how to get away not only from the grid but also the blob. Because they are so omnipresent, how we can remove everything and have it just be almost nothing in the sense of it being just lines but still take up space?

JACKIE — Agnes Martin grew up in the prairie of Canada. I grew up next to the ocean. You would look out there and see this vaguely undulating line. That line that she makes is the horizon line. The horizon line is very abstract. It is out there far away and comes absolutely back to you—your hand is in it. These are not mechanically made. It is as far away as the horizon but as close to you as touch and that's the magic of her work. I think it depends on what you see. The grid is the

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— Michelle Lopez

coming together of the horizon and the vertical. It is the bringing together of opposites, basically. We have used them [*laughter*] and not the best ways—putting people behind bars. But they carry those two things together in a kind of a harmony of their own sort. We also use them to catch fish and do a lot of other things, but that is the utility part of it.

MICHELLE — It is interesting that Anna talks about the prison of the grid because I think the thing I am concerned about is that my work gets talked about in relationship to feminism and minimalism. And so much about the *Blue Angels* work was the critique of minimalism and a bit of the safety we find in the grid. For me there are these questions. It is also so architectural to think about boxes and grids. Blocks. I think that is the most liberating thing to think about in terms of sculpture, which I think Anna was talking about: how she thinks about sculpture in relationship to *play* and those tensions.

ANNA — Can I talk about opposition? Because I find that a way for me to really experience a material is to butt it up against something else. I use jeans a lot, and glazed ceramic. These materials act as foils for each other when used in the same piece. I am obsessed with the touch and texture of stuff, and my work allows you to experience the qualities of a material by setting it in relationship with another material.

ALEX — Jackie, you mentioned that you were a part of some of the women's groups that were meeting in the 1960s and 1970s as a way to find and become acquainted with female peers. Can you reflect a little bit on who you were looking to at the time and who you were in dialog with? Who were the other makers and sculptors dealing with some of the same issues?

JACKIE — I was just looking for women, to be perfectly honest. Right? I was teaching ceramics at a ceramics school in Manhattan. One of the people that I was just chatting with—I said I was interested. And she said, "Oh, I know where it is happening." And I went with her. So it came out of those people that were in that small class that I had.

I think you relate to people the way they present to you. How in a hundred

people did I find every sculptor? So the dialog that was going on there is: How do you go to Max's Kansas City without getting your butt pinched? How do you go as a single woman? You couldn't get in. So we planned little political actions. We were all going together and charging into Max's Kansas City, which was a hangout for guy artists. They had all the important conversations. But that is what we did. We were plotting little things like that and having fun. Women seem to have more fun. And we got our butt pinched and a hand down the pants. I'm just saying, you go there for human companionship, not so different than your dog. You feel like you are out with something that lives and breathes and it acknowledges you and so you hang out with people. They were people we had a lot in common with, as it turns out.

MICHELLE — There's an interest in asking Jackie: What was it like then? What is it like now for you? Anna and I were joking last night. If you were a female Chinese sculptor—not from the United States, but actually from China—you might have a leg up. So there are all these things that we are negotiating in terms of the way that we are being historicized or being branded in terms of gender, race, identity.

ALEX — Something that also comes up with regard to gender and sculpture is the often masculinist spaces of foundries and fabrication facilities. I'd love to hear more about your experiences on the level of making. Do you find your expertise or authority ever being called into question when you are making work that requires other people or kinds of production?

MICHELLE — It happens all the time. When I was thinking about making sculpture, I actually was very sensitive to not making this kind of *feminist-post-minimalist-vessel-transparent-resin* kind of work. Even when we were welding recently for this installation, there were questions. "Does she know what she is doing?" I feel like I'm always confronting that question of capability. It is a reality.

ANNA — I try to answer that question through my work. Yes, there are a lot of preconceived notions of how I should be or act. My question is: what can a woman be? What can a woman artist be? What can I do? And then I answer those questions with my work

and with my actions. I am not looking specifically for women artists but for those people who are forging exciting ways to be in the world. Often they happen to be women and artists! And so that is sort of where I am. As for the so-called masculine world of foundries and fabrication, I enter relationships with fabricators with the understanding that, yeah, I might have sexist things happen to me or they might doubt me, or it will be more difficult because they assume that I don't know what I'm doing. I don't want to dwell there long because I just want to make my work. And making work using tools like welding and foundries is simply exciting because of that physical challenge, that wrestling with and discovery through materials. I am doing things with my body that people might think that I can't do. That is part of the pleasure of doing it.

MICHELLE — That makes a lot of sense. That is a positive spin to being a woman. I think that relates a lot to Jackie's philosophy of making—the way you talked about your own relationship to materials and process and your expectations for yourself.

JACKIE — It sounds like materials, like it is kind of precious. But this is lumberyard stuff, right? You start out with matter and you make it into some version of an object. I think that some people—artists, and scientists too—are attracted to what they don't know. And it's not like, *Who gets to do what?* It is part of the impulse to live. It is simply, *You have to go in there.* Some people are not competitive with the world, and others are. But it is challenging yourself. It is an unknown. You are interested, and you're going to go do it and we will see what happens. You might have a few other thoughts related to it, but part of it is the discovery of it.

Years ago, I had a studio in a triangular building. It was weird. It was on Canal at the edge of Chinatown and the Manhattan Bridge. These places had not been occupied in years and it was falling apart and I could afford it. And so in this triangle building, I start making the first cube. [*Laughter*] One evening, in bed sleeping, I saw a little spot on this wall, just a little—now you would say a laser dot. And in the dream I went over and dug on it like the mice do on my floor. I made it bigger and bigger and saw into the adjacent building—[which,] in reality, would

not have been possible because it was brick. But in the dream I did that. There were cobwebs and light coming in through the cobwebs. It was very intriguing. I had a dream similar to that one again and what I decided... Some of my early pieces were meant to be vertical but they fell over so much that I decided to make them on the floor. [*For Sheet Rock Piece, 1976*] I made a little room like what I saw in that space with the little aperture big enough for your eye and a little more. And they built maybe sixteen layers, some layers of sheet rock about this thick. So I had a little space in the center and on all six sides of this was this little eye spot, to make it silent and still. A thousand pounds of sheet rock, heavy, and it had that little scene into the space. So there was a little light filtering in there. You do it and you look at it and the first time I made that people wanted to know if I had mirrors in it. So it was new for other people, not just for me, but you get to see this thing, and what that means to you. That has a value. I know the choice of the shape I used was affected by the triangular studio that I had. It was a tiny space. So a number of things contribute to something—it's not one thing, it's a variety. But what you are doing is you're manifesting something very important to you. Sturdy going. [*Laughter*] Looking inward. Going to a quiet life place that has mystery for you.

MICHELLE — Continuing with Jackie saying how you start to “see something.” For example, my mirror pieces started with this idea of wanting to make an explosion sculptural, and it started by us moving a big piece of mirror from my house and there was this small imperfection in the mirror where the silver nitrate was chipping away. The illusion created a weird sense of depth because I could look through the mirror; it was just pure glass refracting. It was at that moment I started to do all these experiments with silver nitrate. So I think it is interesting—the rabbit holes we fall into when we make it work. Just this mundane moment of “seeing something” in trying to understand it; sometimes going there intuitively and failing. I remember people came to the studio and looked at my mirror experiments and said, “Do not do this.” And I was like, no, I'm going to keep doing this.

[It's about] just trusting that moment a little bit to keep making it happen.

Clay inspires me in all that it does—it slumps, it cracks, it starts very soft and sticky, and then it gets hard and rigid, and all these changing qualities propel me towards a form.
— Anna Sew Hoy

Anna Sew Hoy

Mirror Blob (Glass Observer), 2008-2009

Celluclay, plaster, burlap, amber, weather

53 x 29 x 21 in.

Photo: Jeff Mullan
Image courtesy of the artist and Campbell Hall Art Gallery

Following page:
Michelle Lopez

House of Cards, 2009
Lead, steel, hand-twisted steel rope, "pulled" glass cane, silver, tin, paracord, foam, rubble

144 x 216 x 57 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Simon Preston, New York

The tension between the control and purpose in letting it be a little unpredictable at the same time. I think of Jackie's explosion pieces for *Burnt Piece* [1977–78], that kind of cube that gets taken apart but put together again and it's allowed to have its own path. I feel that thing when you're making and someone comes to the studio and sees it midway and they say nothing is happening there. [Laughter] But then you have to imagine, no, something can happen. Just that belief, I think, is really important, in terms of a material and not knowing or understanding the material.

JACKIE — These two women, I met when they were younger. They were busy saying whatever they had to say to me and I got to listen to them. [Laughter] I still remember this piece that Anna made. What is that green stuff? Wasabi. It was so funny, I thought it was hilarious. If she had a fortune in wasabi, I mean it was like this. I found out tonight it was not wasabi. But it referred to this wasabi mountain. And I was just so touched by this young thing and this is what she came up to do—to make a mountain of wasabi. It was serious and it was humorous and it just tickled me every time. It is what I mostly remember about her from way back when.

I think you get to know people through the use of things. We had a different relationship because I was teaching a seminar class and I was experimenting with the students left and right, whatever she might have thought we were doing. I'm not sure what I did with your group—

ANNA — I remember.

JACKIE — We tried to focus on things and see what came out if you focused long enough on something. We looked for long periods of time at people's work. I had them write what they missed in school and their education and whatnot and they said nobody looks at their work and effort. So what we did—what was my intention to do—we would have slides and we just sat there and looked at them. We had about three or four hours to do that. We would talk about what we saw from this perspective of hanging out with it a really long time. We would write that down and we would answer questions related to that experience.

MICHELLE — One question I remem-

ber Jackie asking students when we were looking at work: "Is the engine in the car?" And now when I am thinking about my students, I want to ask them: "What is the engine like? What is the nature of the engine?" And I think I get this from Jackie. What is the soul of it? What will keep you going?

ANNA — When Nancy Shaver was my teacher at Bard she said something that stuck with me. You have to look at what you are making as much as you spend time making it. I don't want to do that sometimes; I'd rather move stuff around. It's easier to keep going than to actually stop and look, in order to ask: What am I making, what is this thing? Focused looking is kind of the hard part of making something, and I remind my students of this.

MICHELLE — I often remind my students: The work is not about you. Ask the work what it needs because often we as artists are thinking, *What am I supposed to be making that's radical?* But I think that what we were talking about earlier is important. How does meditation come into the work? Because the work always knows what it needs, but sometimes we are not listening. Or looking.

Jackie Winsor

Exploded Piece,
1980–82

Wood, reinforced
concrete, plaster, gal-
leaf, explosive material

34¹/₂ x 34¹/₂ x 34¹/₂"

© Jackie Winsor
Courtesy Paula Cooper
Gallery, New York

Following page:
Anna Sew Hoy

Psychic Body (Small),
2017

Patinated bronze,
decomposed/green

144 x 168 x 132" (H)

Image courtesy of
LAND
Photo Jeff Mosen