

OCULA

Re-Thinking Scale and Measurement at the SculptureCenter

By Banyu Huang, June 8, 2022

From Chernobyl to abandoned Chinese cityscapes, a fascination with ruinous landscapes reveals deep anxieties over systemic breakdown, whether physical, infrastructural, or ideological. Amid a mutating pandemic, war, and ecological catastrophe, the fear is palpable.



Exhibition view: *In Practice: Literally means collapse*, SculptureCenter, New York (12 May–1 August 2022). Courtesy SculptureCenter. Photo: Charles Benton.

In Practice: Literally means collapse, a group show featuring newly commissioned work by 11 artists at the SculptureCenter in New York (12 May–1 August 2022), takes a speculative leap into the implications of systems collapsing, finding generative fusions from within.

Staged mainly in the institution's repurposed lower-level space, the exhibition immerses viewers in what resembles a doomsday bunker. At the entrance to the dimly lit, vault-like space, Monsieur Zohore's collaborative installation with Joshua Coyne, *MZ.21 (Pentecost)* (2017–2022), is a lavish, money-blowing machine roughly the size of a phone booth. Viewers are invited to step inside the structure made of glass and steel, with L.E.D. lights running up the sides.



Monsieur Zohore and Joshua Coyne, *MZ.21 (Pentecost)* (2017–2022). Collaborative installation. 229 x 81 x 122 cm. Exhibition view: *In Practice: Literally means collapse*, SculptureCenter, New York (12 May–1 August 2022). Courtesy the artist and Half Gallery, New York. Photo: Charles Benton.

Activated once the booth's glass door is closed, swirls of fake 20-dollar bills and rose petals dance in the machine, while recordings of sweet Catholic hymns play in one's ear. With dramatic lighting cast from above and red carpet below, the work recalls teleportation pads from science fiction, setting a dramatic stage for critical reflections to unfold.

Site-specific artworks curated to blend into their surroundings follow, with viewers transported from the amorous intertwining of late capitalism with Catholicism in Monsieur Zohore's installation, to objects from within a survivalist camp that has now turned to ruin.



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Beyond appearances, ruinous artifacts can divulge valuable information about the operating logic behind hidden chains of production. This can be noted in Marco Barrera's work, for which the act of collecting is equally an act of archiving and mapping.

It is easy to overlook four old, rusted safe doors that the artist has installed along the brick walls of a narrow corridor. Their burnt sienna and umber colours and uneven surfaces fit seamlessly with the nooks and crannies of their aged host surfaces.



Marco Barrera, *Untitled (Tree on River Bank)* (2022). Steel safe door, gold leaf, oil paint, varnish. 48.3 × 38.1 × 15.2 cm. Exhibition view: *In Practice: Literally means collapse*, SculptureCenter, New York (12 May–1 August 2022). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Charles Benton.

Each door features a miniature oil landscape painting of waterways by unknown artists from the early 20th century. One of them, *Untitled (Tree on River Bank)* (2022), lays out a scene of pastoral bliss: a bucolic path meanders along a river—one among a series of imagined conduits that enabled the first waves of industrialisation.

Shown in parallel is *Drawing a line backwards* (2022), an assortment of water samples inside labelled glass jars collected by Barrera, each relating to different sites of development of New York City, including runoff from a marble quarry in Vermont that was the source of material for ornamentation in buildings in Lower Manhattan.



Marco Barrera, *Drawing a line backwards* (2022). Partial archive of New York City water: glass jars, steel Tri-Boro shelving unit, book. Exhibition view: *In Practice: Literally means collapse*, SculptureCenter, New York (12 May–1 August 2022). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Charles Benton.

These are placed on rows of shelves tucked inside a small alcove, accompanied by an artist book with notes from the collection of samples by artists and text about the history of the sites. As these two bodies of water from different time periods converge, networked veins of industrialisation and urbanisation emerge.

As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan suggests in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), our 'objective' perception of scale and space, including landmarks, unit measurements, and cardinal positions, takes the human body as a fundamental reference point.



Cherisse Gray, *Locum Tenens* (2022). Mouse house, actor and stage, diffusion frame, heated bench. Exhibition view: *In Practice: Literally means collapse*, SculptureCenter, New York (12 May–1 August 2022). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Charles Benton.

One such experimentation into scale and sensation, Cherisse Gray's installation *Locum Tenens* (2022) includes a spiral metal staircase that leads into a rectangular drop-ceiling structure, both scaled to befit a pet mouse. Bending down to look into the tiny entrance, one can make out red lights, plants, and droning fan furnishings for the unknown inhabitant.

Next to the cryptic home, a concrete bench reverts back to human scale, inviting viewers to sit and soak in the unusual domestic environment, with light casting from a shell-shaped lamp nearby and heat emanating from the bench gradually warming one's body.



Cherisse Gray, *Locum Tenens* (2022). Mouse house, actor and stage, diffusion frame, heated bench. Exhibition view: *In Practice: Literally means collapse*, SculptureCenter, New York (12 May–1 August 2022). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Charles Benton.

Disrupting our anthropocentric framework, Stella Zhong's sculptural technologies *Spontaneous Unmixing of Static and 1/3s Is Never Observed* (2022) include two large, dark blue folding geometric structures installed along a concrete archway.

Inside the structures, hidden beneath large surfaces or above vantage point, are tiny ecologies consisting of miniature, abstract pieces simulating organic circuit boards or molecular formations that appear to follow their own logic. They require strenuous looking to be seen.



Stella Zhong, *Spontaneous Unmixing of Static and 1/3s Is Never Observed* (Fig.1) and (Fig.2) (2022). String, various clays, paper, stainless-steel mesh, oil paint, Aqua-Resin, plaster, sand, epoxy, paint, concrete, wood. Variable dimensions. Exhibition view: *In Practice: Literally means collapse*, SculptureCenter, New York (12 May–1 August 2022). Courtesy the artist and Chapter, New York. Photo: Charles Benton.

If disguise prompts alternative perceptions, Violet Dennison's large-scale wall sculpture *Maniac Double* (2022) further expands on the inaccessibility of systems, reflecting on how information is stored, communicated, and encrypted.

The artist devised a system that weaves pneumatic tubing into knotted patterns. The shape of each knot is different, determined by an encryption software that translates text into knot formations. The network of black, pretzel-knot tubes is interlaced with a row of vertical transparent tubes, their insides dripping with colourful paint. Together, they form a constellation of poetic data that cannot be easily accessed or deciphered.



Violet Dennison, *Maniac Double* (2022). Polyurethane tubing, aluminium, vinyl, copper and steel hardware, rhinestones, urethane with pigment. 188 x 267 cm. Exhibition view: *In Practice: Literally means collapse*, SculptureCenter, New York (12 May–1 August 2022). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Charles Benton.

Here, artworks are not preserved in a ruinous state for posterity to appreciate, but reveal how anthropocentric metrics delimiting time and scale can become subject to change. Time congeals as space explodes inwards, from collapse to regeneration.