

Sarah Oppenheimer's artistic practice considers how our behaviors adapt to architectural spaces and the permissions and possibilities perceived through the regulation of bodies. By questioning assumed spatial relationships to portals such as doors and windows, Oppenheimer's work, one could say, gives agency to the viewer instead of what is on view. As such, the work often disrupts the unidirectional gaze that is endemic to traditional displays of art objects. From one project to the next, the through lines of Oppenheimer's research and process are made clear, consistently utilizing three-dimensional space with the ideas of perception and participation at its core—thus ultimately conjuring a fourth dimension.

Oppenheimer's permanent intervention in the contemporary galleries of the Baltimore Museum of Art, *W-120301* (2012), interrupts the typical museum gaze by inviting interchanges between visitors on two separate floors of the museum. With aluminum and reflective glass imbedded in the walls, the artist creates a picture plane divided into four sections. These include two windows into different museum spaces: one looks directly into a concrete atrium filled with natural light, while the other looks down at visitors in the gallery below. Both views can be taken in at once, without changing the body's relationship to the wall. It is useful to note that this perspectival play rejects a dominant position of surveillance in favor of exchanges that are activated by what is seen and unseen.

Another way in which Oppenheimer subverts expected order can be seen in a series of works that shifts the relationships between museum visitor and guard. Accustomed to having their bodies on view, guards monitor the activities of those who come too close, intervening before surfaces are touched. At the Pérez Art Museum Miami (2016) and the Wexner Center for the Arts (2017), Oppenheimer gave visitors the ability to not merely touch, but also to physically change the orientation of the works. Large forms made from plates of glass that reflected fluorescent and natural light could be rotated into different positions. Instead of playing a prohibitive role, guards embraced participation and demonstrated the license that Oppenheimer granted visitors, encouraging them to manipulate the objects through touch.

Later exhibitions at Kunstmuseum Thun (2020) and the Wellin Museum of Art (2021) continued the artist's research into creating networks of actions. In them Oppenheimer devised systems in which our bodies' energies became "inputs" that produce specific and multiple "outputs" with varying degrees of visibility. Visitors could not only observe but also determine the positions of walls and lighting mechanisms. In this way they were encouraged to collaborate as a group for greater impact.

Among many influences, Oppenheimer feels most connected to artists who may be initially regarded as object-makers, such as Lygia Clark and Senga Nengudi. Although their work is presented in museum settings, it also functions as an agent of social

exchange. Clark began her artistic career in the 1950s as an abstract painter, establishing the Neo-Concrete movement with fellow Brazilian artists. Over the next thirty years, she transitioned into imaginary architectures, relational objects, and eventually devised her own body work technique called Structuring of the Self in 1976. Nengudi's most exhibited and collected works were sculptural installations created with pantyhose, which she debuted in 1977. Commonly installed without the evidence of the performances Nengudi conducted within them, their forms are radically changed. *R.S.V.P.*, the title she gave this series, was an explicit call for audiences to respond.

Because Oppenheimer's works are made of solid objects with great physical presence, one might identify the artist's practice as sculptural. However, "sculpture" is a term that Oppenheimer pushes against. Such works are meant to be autonomous and they maintain their presence whether or not we interact with them. But in Oppenheimer's view, the work is not complete without the conditional relationships it has to the light, the built architecture, and especially the people who surround it. Not surprisingly, "architecture" is consistently listed among Oppenheimer's media.

To Oppenheimer, the word "apparatus" more accurately describes these relational qualities. An apparatus is part of a larger system and it typically has a specific purpose. One might not see Oppenheimer's work as having a determined outcome. Perhaps that is precisely the point. While the works are designed to create the opportunity for infinite possibilities, the creation process includes many controls: the materials are chosen meticulously, their arrangements are modeled in the studio, and they are rigorously scripted and tested. The development is carried out with an acute understanding that the works become part of their environment, and that each environment is dynamic. For instance, Oppenheimer uses ADA accessibility regulations—often seen as cumbersome restrictions for able-bodied architects and designers—as a starting point for imagining the apparatus. This allows for what the artist calls "gestural access"—a type of embedded access that departs from purely utilitarian function—and demonstrates how readily mindsets can shift. With such codes applied to each step of the creative process, the end result becomes an "operational field" as opposed to a discrete object. As Oppenheimer states, these structural changes are not only problems to solve but also modifications of the "material, optical, social footprint" of the work. They would not exist as such without these limits of administrative and legal governance, controls that are enforced in all institutions.

It is not only the architectural structures at the center of Oppenheimer's work but also the mechanics that influence human interaction. As a critic at the Yale School of Art, the artist has long collaborated with the university's school of engineering. *Sensitive Machine*, Oppenheimer's Wellin Museum of Art exhibition (2021), shares a title with a workshop Oppenheimer taught at Yale's Center for Engineering Innovation and Design. In it, students isolated a single gesture to be translated into mechanisms that became extensions of the body. Participants investigated how machines can become sensory conduits—a concept that signals how people come into contact within Oppenheimer's exhibitions. The artist is curious to investigate the quotidian objects that shape our existence in built environments and enable social collaboration, including tuning forks, clocks, and barometers.

Oppenheimer's relation to mechanical, structural, and behavioral engineering makes *C-010106* ideally situated between two

buildings at the Cockrell School of Engineering. Located on the pedestrian bridge between the Engineering Education and Research Center and the Gary L. Thomas Energy Engineering Building, the floor-to-ceiling glass features prominently as a way to showcase students at work and to promote multidisciplinary collaboration through formal demonstrations of transparency and access. While *C-010106* uses glass as a material, its function shifts significantly.

*C-010106* consists of two apparatuses at opposite ends of a pedestrian bridge. At each location, a pair of diagonal reflective glass plates is buttressed between a pair of clear glass sheets. At the intersection of the four panes, the glass passes through an incision in the bridge surface, creating sight lines between those above and below the bridge. The reflective surfaces within the incision create a surprising effect—permitting pedestrians on top of the bridge to see the reflections of those underneath, and vice versa.

The bridge serves as a connector between spaces and people. Its utility is clear; it makes travel from one building to another more efficient and direct. Into this transitional space intended for movement Oppenheimer invites new behavioral functions such as observation, contemplation, and social exchange. By siting one apparatus on a north/south axis and another on an east/west axis, a “switch” is created in the flow of traffic and the habitual patterns of movement. The viewer is not limited to a frontal confrontation with the object but is able to engage through it. As the artist remarks, this act of transition is processional, rather than manual in the way one might open or close a door. *C-010106* encourages a choreography between people as well as with the shifting light, sound, seasons, and greater environmental rhythms that are in constant flux.

The social impact of the architectural and art histories that have informed Oppenheimer recalls the literary theorist Caroline Levine and her expansive concept of “form,” which she defines as “any arrangement of elements—any ordering, patterning, or shaping.” By using the concept of “affordance” from design theory—the idea of what the environment offers the individual—she asks how material or design can be applied to the aesthetic form:

Affordances point us both to what all forms are capable of—to the range of uses each could be put to, even if no one has yet taken advantage of those possibilities—and also to their limits, the restrictions intrinsic to particular materials and organizing principles... Form emerges from this perspective as transhistorical, portable, and abstract, on the one hand, and material, situated, and political, on the other.

The affordances of glass are manifold. We understand its veracity, its one-to-one representation through translucence or reflection. The seamlessness of our glass screens is posited as the threshold between the individual and the network, becoming an all-encompassing source of information, labor, leisure and memory. But the glass itself is intended to disappear.

Oppenheimer uses these associations to reinscribe our relationships to matter and the knowledge it supports. The apparatus provides not only reflections of the condition of each precise moment but also representations of our individual selves with each other and the encounters that may regularly be dismissed or ignored. While the environmental and social convergences conveyed by *C-010106* are fleeting, the apparatus is highly present. It insists that each individual is positioned amongst others—not only in the instance of contact but also in the continual approach and retreat of our collective body.