



1000 WORDS

# SARAH OPPENHEIMER

TALKS ABOUT “SENSITIVE MACHINE”

IN 2016, as Sarah Oppenheimer was preparing her project *S-281913* for the Pérez Art Museum Miami, she had a telling exchange with the media theorist Alexander Galloway. The two were discussing the implications for Oppenheimer’s work of its deepening engagement with not just the spatial but also the temporal conditions of the built environment, and in particular her proposition that certain aspects of architecture might be thought of as “switches”: mechanisms, like doors and other threshold structures, that influence and modulate physical and perceptual flow. In the interview, which was published in *Bomb* magazine, Oppenheimer and Galloway began to speculate about expanding our definition of these switches to include the human actors themselves, the bodies that animate the spaces through which they circulate. Individuals moving within the spatio-social order of the work would, the artist conjectured, become “radiant points,” “changing nodes in a system.”

As Oppenheimer told me not long ago, she considers the period around the creation of the Pérez show to have been pivotal in the development of

much of her recent work, particularly “Sensitive Machine,” her current exhibition at Hamilton College’s Wellin Museum of Art in Clinton, New York. The artist first became known for her exquisitely designed, sensorially confounding interventions in gallery and museum architecture: eye- and mind-bending cuts and oculi; elegant, exactingly precise sculptural forms that use transparency and reflection, passage and interdiction, to unmake and remake our relationships to our surroundings. Over the past five years, Oppenheimer has focused her meticulous creativity on projects that foreground and complicate cause and effect, and the show at the Wellin represents her most fully realized investigation to date of the interfaces between human and architectural figures. Its array of finely engineered instruments, insinuated clandestinely into the fabric of the site, coordinate intricate networks that encourage improvisational interactions with the environment and reveal new and dynamically reorienting manifestations of embodied presence.

—Jeffrey Kastner



Opposite page and above: Views of “Sarah Oppenheimer: Sensitive Machine,” 2021, Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Photos: John Bentham.

Left: Sarah Oppenheimer, *I-142-03-70 (detail)*, 2021, aluminum, steel, timing belts, existing architecture. Installation view, Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Photo: John Bentham.



**WE SHIFT OUR WEIGHT** as we grasp a handle; we release our grip as the handle turns. Touch transforms: It modulates the rhythms that connect us to our environment. I began making tactile works while developing *S-281913*, exhibited at the Pérez Art Museum Miami in 2016. A pair of glass and metal structures were physically manipulated by visitors, and those human-object interactions produced spatial and perceptual permutations. Watching people engage with the exhibition, I noticed that, suddenly, there was no contemplative space between the viewer and the work. It was a totally different dynamic. People began to communicate with one another through gestural contact—someone would touch a glass volume, transforming it into a lintel or a beam. Others would mirror those actions and touch it too. I had been thinking about thresholds and how they create multivalent experience. On either side of a boundary, there is a prospect, an invitation, a promise of passage. Approaching the threshold and passing through, you become enmeshed in the space of the in-between. Bodily proximity collapses visual and critical distance.

*S-281913* was developed in tandem with *S-337473*, exhibited in 2017 at the Wexner Center for the Arts, in Columbus, Ohio, and in both pieces there was a breakdown of conventional spectatorial experience. At the Wexner, glass columns were nested within a constricted architectural space, and tactile manipulation of those dynamic volumes created a heightened awareness of nearby boundaries. There was no outside; everyone was in the system, and there was communication across it. The work became a medium through which people connected with one another and with the environment, a transmitter between you and the world and the world and you. It expanded the focus of the artwork from a process of looking and being looked at, and transformed it into connective tissue.

I wanted to amplify the presence of this material and social medium by exaggerating habitual dynamics—you turn a doorknob, let's say, and the door opens. This required a change in my methods. Rather than dissecting architectural plans and sections, which imply static structure, I started using network diagrams and kinetic relay systems to study how the works might unfold in time, how they might expand and contract temporally. I looked for simple opportunities to set up unfamiliar chains of cause and effect, whereby an intimate gesture would reposition remote architecture. You touch something here, you affect something there. The idea was to set in motion a form of action at a distance.

The exhibition at the Wellin Museum of Art comprises four technical ensembles that catalyze the energy of a moving body to amplify the movement of the built environment. Each of these “instruments” is buried within a discrete partition—somewhere between a wall and a column—that is bisected by a rotating central beam. Turning the beam changes the position of supporting walls and the ceiling lighting grid. Lighting tracks rise and fall between the vertical surfaces of sliding walls. Inputs and outputs are not contiguous. Distributed in an interconnected network, the position of one element affects a remote element that appears to be architecturally discrete.

There was a time when the labor involved in my work was more visible in the artifact, in its formal precision or finishes. This precision is now situated within the instruments themselves. These mechanical parts—these “timepieces,” as it were—coordinate perpetual rotation with phased linear oscillation. The opacity of the mechanism operates as a technical black box; it encourages a process of testing and probing.

Manipulating an input imparts a sense of the weight of the object, of its changing position, and of the way action has an effect. As the input responds to manual pressure, we gauge the relative mass of our body and the position of our limbs. When this pressure changes the position of



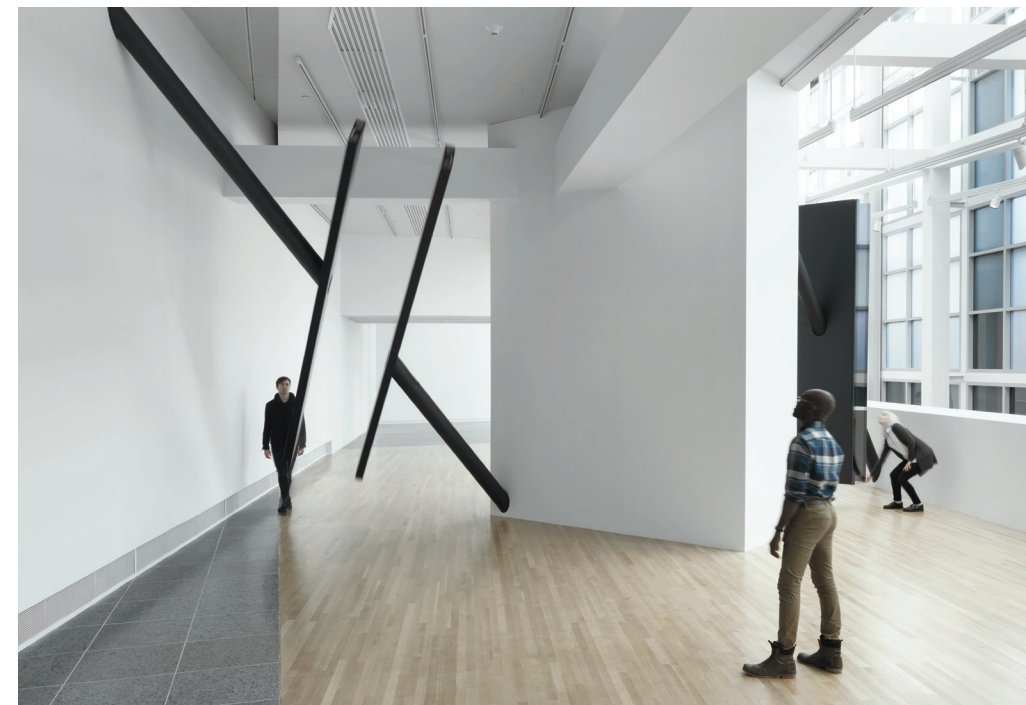
**I started using network diagrams and kinetic relay systems to study how the works might unfold in time, how they might expand and contract temporally.**



Opposite page: Sarah Oppenheimer, *S-281913*, 2016, aluminum, glass, existing architecture. Installation views, Pérez Art Museum Miami. Photos: James Ewing.

Above: View of “Sarah Oppenheimer, *Sensitive Machine*,” 2021, Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Photo: John Bentham.

Below: Sarah Oppenheimer, *S-337473*, 2017, metal, glass, existing architecture. Installation view, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH. Photo: Serge Hasenböhler.



noncontiguous objects, tactile feedback is stretched across a spatial gap. There is an unexpected connection. We might notice that an adjacent wall is moving because it alters our immediate surroundings—blocking or clearing our path through the gallery—but be unaware of a lighting track descending overhead. Observing this relay at a distance, we build a mental map of linkage and causality. We learn the relationships among overlapping instruments and adapt to the expanded extent of our own reach.

As we play with relay systems activated by a “human motor,” a time-scale calibrated to the body emerges. Now things change in a slow, organic way, even though what’s changing are the inorganic structural elements of the built environment. I think the work raises questions about the familiarization and defamiliarization of the technical object. On the one hand, it’s unfamiliar, because you don’t expect this type of temporal frequency to animate the architectural envelope. But it’s also familiar, in that the scales and cycles of motion are closely correlated with human scales and cycles, and that means there’s a strange, animal-like character that begins to be expressed by the building. On one level, the gallery is quite empty, but everything feels so active and mobile, somehow alive. □

“Sarah Oppenheimer: *Sensitive Machine*” is on view through December 5 at the Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY.