



Increasing the Scale of the Intimate: A Conversation with Chloë Bass

Chloë Bass is the artist and creator behind 'The Book of Everyday Instruction,' forthcoming from The Operating System in December 2018; a solo show of the same name appeared at the Knockdown Center in NYC earlier this year. We spoke about her work, this project, and so much more in late summer.

By Elæ Moss
October 2, 2018



Bill Dietz and Chloë Bass at Independent Curators International in June 2017 as part of Chapter 2, "what is shared, what is offered," addressing the following questions: "what do we allow with our displeasure?" "When do acts of refusal become exquisite?"

"In 'The Book of Everyday Instruction' — which presents a body of work developed between 2015 and 2018, split into eight chapters — Bass radicalizes the language through which we experience, navigate, and discuss intimacy. She surrenders the role of author in this evolving narrative, and instead approaches each chapter with an eagerness to let the story write itself. Bass imagines a series of interpersonal interactions wherein she shares creative license with her collaborators, an eclectic group of strangers she finds on the internet, through research, and within her diverse creative communities of practice."

— Nico Wheadon, *The Brooklyn Rail*

"Instead of setting the stage for familiarity and comfort as politeness most often does, Bass' announces the space in which she lets us know what she will and will not do for us. It is a smile that says, "No."; It is the space in which she articulates her refusal to take control, to tell you what to think, to look for you, to, in a certain dramatically put sense, be "The Artist"; Which is not at all to say there is nothing to say, nothing to read or see — what there is is vast and infinitely specific and imbued with a rare intelligence and sentiment. But the only way you can see it is to take responsibility for your own seeing. To take responsibility for yourself as another singularity, a specific singularity bringing with it all the historical baggage that is positionality. Bass invites us to play a different game, one in which neither the rules nor we are familiar."

— Bill Dietz, *"Politesse against the social"*

In 2015, conceptual artist Chloë Bass began a two-year chronicle of one-on-one social interactions, beginning with the question "How do we know when we're really together?"

Through private performances, interactive experiences, text installations, interviews and photography, Bass explored the pair relationship, expanding ideas of place, history, activity, and distance.

In developing the project, Bass conceptualized the book as an exhibit; now, in collaboration with The Operating System, she presents an exhibit as a book. (Now available for discounted pre-order directly through the OS!) Stay tuned for an invite to our upcoming book launch & celebration, full details TBA.



Sitting by the lake in the fog, two boys sprawled out at the end of the jetty, a young couple climbing on the rocks, while we talk about not much; 40 minutes, Cleveland, OH, April 2015.

Greetings comrade!

Thank you for talking to us about your process today!

Can you introduce yourself, in a way that you would choose?

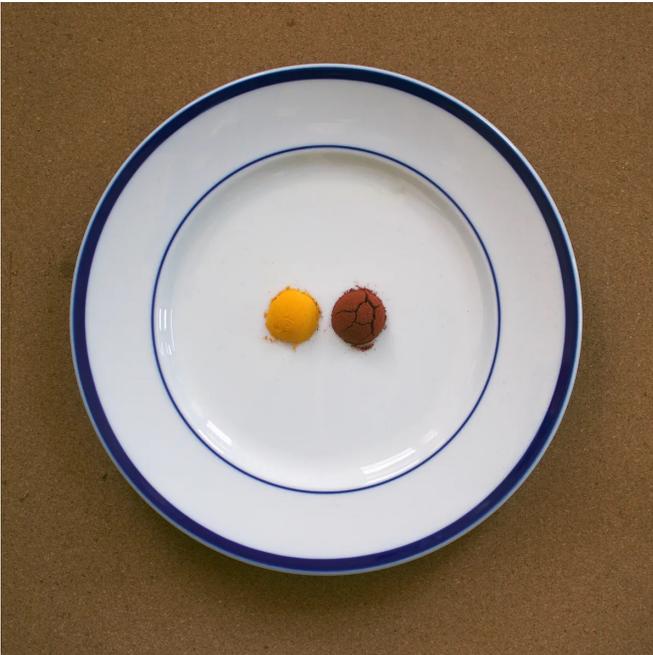
My name is Chloë Bass and I'm a New Yorker.

Ha, me too. Always and forever. So, tell us: why are you an artist/maker/creative practitioner?

I'm an artist for two reasons: first, and perhaps most importantly, it's the only thing I could consistently think of to do. Secondly, and perhaps more honestly, I think art gives me a lot of permission to be a flexible and expansive thinker, to learn a wide variety of things about the world, and to consistently acquire new skills and ways of being.

When did you decide you were this thing, "artist" (and/or: do you feel comfortable calling yourself by this title, what other titles or affiliations do you prefer/feel are more accurate)?

I give myself permission to call myself an artist because no one else is ever going to provide that permission for me. In so many ways, we're responsible for, and capable of, shaping the stories that will be told about us in the future. Labels can be one easy way to guide a kind of social reading, or ensuring the legacy we want.



The Book of Everyday Instruction, Chapter Six: What is shared, what is offered (Four Phases of Love: The Impossible Fairytale), 2017.

Talk about the process or instinct to move these poems (or your work in general) as independent entities into a body of work. How and why did this happen? Have you had this intention for a while? What encouraged and/or confounded this (or a book, in general) coming together? Was it a struggle?

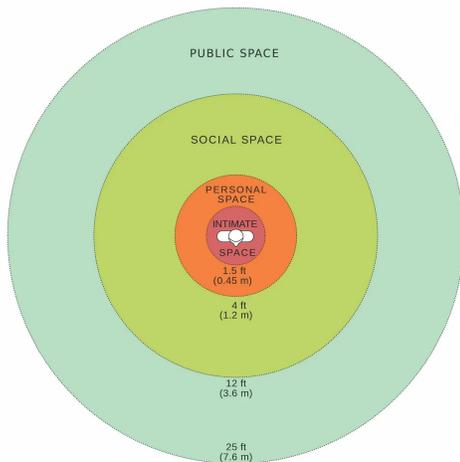
In general, my work is project-based, and doesn't really exist as independent entities. What took me a bit longer to decide — or even to understand — is how my various projects are connected to each other, and are, in fact, all part of the same body of overall thought and research. All of my work investigates intimacy. My projects are gradually increasing the scale of that intimacy. I started with the self (The Bureau of Self-Recognition, 2011–2013). From 2015–2017, and ending with this book in collaboration with the Operating System, I'm working with the pair (The Book of Everyday Instruction). In early 2018 I started an investigation of immediate family units, tentatively titled Obligation to Others Holds Me in My Place. By growing the work in this way, I hope to see what carries over as group sizes get larger: where does intimacy hold, and where does it break? What might surprisingly be the same between a million people as it is between two?



from "Obligation To Others Holds Me In My Place" (Dalmatian Narrative), 2018

What formal structures or other constrictive practices (if any) do you use in the creation of your work? Have certain teachers or instructive environments, or readings/writings/work of other creative people informed the way you work/write?

I spend a lot of time around art, and in particular, a lot of time talking about and critiquing art as part of an academic process. This has advantages and disadvantages. It offers a certain kind of built-in community with a strong conversational pull. I have opportunities to teach, but also to learn. On the other hand, I think one very important aspect of my practice has been spending time around art that isn't explicitly educational, where my ability to simply *respond* as a viewer or participant is valued as a spontaneous experience. I need both kinds of thinking: the rigid and exciting world of academia and arts education, and the flexible, more flowing state of associative thinking and unlimited emotional possibility (or not).



I think our strong, almost instinctive feelings about public spaces are formed by how close we are to other people when we to experience them. There's a built-in excitement to walking in a public square. It's not the weather. It's the nearness of other bodies.

A Field Guide to Spatial Intimacy, from The Book of Everyday Instruction, Chapter Four: It's amazing we don't have more fights, 2016.

In terms of specific thinkers, my artist statement currently lists the following influences: For rigor, connection, and creep factor: Adrian Piper, Andrea Fraser, Vito Acconci. For use of language: Claudia Rankine, Lucy Lippard, and Frank O'Hara. For structure/archiving: Group Material and Stanley Brouwn. Additionally, as so much of my work draws from immediate experience of the world, I'm influenced by people I watch on the street, the group behaviors that manifest through internet culture, and signage in public places (even when meant for private eyes). Some elements of my projects always already exist, and it's just a matter of finding them. I use familiar structures — bureaucracy, social rituals and games — to inspire participation and destabilize assumptions.

Speaking of monikers, what does your title represent? How was it generated? Talk about the way you titled the book, and how your process of naming (individual pieces, sections, etc) influences you and/or colors your work specifically.

The title of the book, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, is the title of the project. It's funny to me that a project that had "book" involved in the conceptual structure is now becoming an actual book. I don't remember how I landed on this title initially. Like many of my other titles, I think it revealed itself to me as an exciting turn of phrase, and then I structured the work, in some sense, around living up to that idea. Also, when I googled "Book of Everyday Instruction," one of the first things that came up was Proverbs, a section of the Bible. I'm not religious, but I do think the way we organize around and through religion has a lot of interesting intimacies bound up in it, so sticking with something vaguely Biblical seemed appropriate. What is the ultimate pairing if not the fraught relationship between person and god?



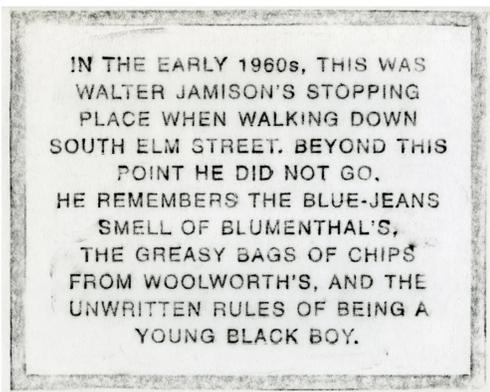
The Book of Everyday Instruction, Chapter Eight: Complete upon arrival (Student), 2018.

What does this book DO (as much as what it says or contains)?

My hope is that this book will serve as something of its own gallery exhibit: both a documentation of many works that I've made during the nearly three years of working on *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, and also as an indication of how these works fit together both thematically and aesthetically. It's a huge project, and some connections were not apparent to me at the outset. This book is like a visit to an exhibit, where the readers start to make their own connections and enjoy creative discoveries.

What would be the best possible outcome for this book? What might it do in the world, and how will its presence as an object facilitate your creative role in your community and beyond? What are your hopes for this book, and for your practice?

Art objects are funny things. They don't necessarily travel very well. They don't always live up to their display. They don't always consistently maintain the meaning that they hold as artifacts of another experience. A book that documents, describes, and draws readers through an artistic project, on the other hand, can travel quite well, and perhaps maintain or control its own meaning a bit better. My hope is that this book is one conduit for the affective worth and relational meaning of the work. I'm always struggling to understand the best way to present my works so that people understand, consider, and use the projects to live their own lives differently (hopefully for the better!). This book could unlock a lot of secrets that I'm trying to get out to a broader audience, or to share with my existing audience in a slightly deeper way.



The Book of Everyday Instruction, Chapter Three: We walk the world two by two (Walter), 2016.

Let's talk a little bit about the role of poetics and creative community in social activism, in particular in what I call "Civil Rights 2.0," which has remained immediately present all around us in the time leading up to this series' publication. I'd be curious to hear some thoughts on the challenges we face in speaking and publishing across lines of race, age, privilege, social/cultural background, and sexuality within the community, vs. the dangers of remaining and producing in isolated "silos."

This is a huge topic, and one that I think about a lot. I'm not sure that we're very successful at doing this with any objects that require purchasing except, maybe, things like paper towels. I know that not everyone uses paper towels for a variety of reasons (cost, sustainability, and so on), but we know what they are. So they have a kind of meaning in our minds that's associated, maybe, with utility. And even if we don't, or can't buy paper towels, this is because we have specific reasons not to, related to our understanding of what paper towels are used for, their cost, and so on. We're not forming ideas against them in the abstract. How do we get art to do that? How can art be useful, and something that people know about and respond to because it's known, even if they decide they still don't want it, or can't have it? How can we do that for each of our projects individually, as well as for the idea of Art or Poetry more generally? I want to be as good as paper towels. I mean they're really not sustainable but I think they're pretty good at a lot of other stuff. I would reach a lot of people, both ones who are like me, and those who aren't, if I had a more paper towel approach.



The Book of Everyday Instruction, Chapter Six: What is shared, what is offered (Four Phases of Love: Scent), 2017.

Is there anything else we should have asked, or that you want to share?

I think we covered it! Thank you.



Photo by Texas Isaiiah, January 2018.

Chloë Bass is a multiform conceptual artist working in performance, situation, conversation, publication, and installation. Her work uses daily life as a site of deep research to address scales of intimacy: where patterns hold and break as group sizes expand. She began her work with a focus on the individual (*The Bureau of Self-Recognition*, 2011–2013), has recently concluded a study of pairs (*The Book of Everyday Instruction*, 2015–2017), and will continue to scale up gradually until she's working at the scale of the metropolis. She is currently working on *Obligation To Others Holds Me in My Place* (2018–2022), an investigation of intimacy at the scale of immediate families.

Chloë has held numerous fellowships and residencies: she is a 2020–2022 Faculty Fellow for the Seminar in Public Engagement at the Center for Humanities (CUNY Graduate Center), a 2020–2022 Lucas Art Fellow at Montalvo Art Center, and was a 2019 Art Matters Grantee. Previous recent honors include a residency include a residency at Denniston Hill, the Recess Analog Artist-in-Residence, and a BRIC Media Arts Fellowship. Her projects have appeared nationally and internationally, including recent exhibits at The Studio Museum in Harlem, Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven, BAK basis voor actuele kunst, the Knockdown Center, the Kitchen, the Brooklyn Museum, CUE Art Foundation, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Project Space, The Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, the James Gallery, and elsewhere. Reviews, mentions of, and interviews about her work have appeared in *Artforum*, *The New York Times*, *Hyperallergic*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *BOMB*, *Temporary Art Review*, and *Artnews* among others. Her monograph was published by The Operating System in December 2018; she also has a chapbook, *#sky #nofilter*, forthcoming from DoubleCross Press. Her short-form writing has been published on *Hyperallergic*, *Arts.Black*, and the *Walker Reader*. She is an Assistant Professor of Art at Queens College, CUNY, where she co-runs Social Practice Queens with Gregory Sholette. Follow Chloë Bass on IG @publicinvestigator.

