

## Art as Experiment: On Jessica Stockholder's *For Events*

I've never had much of a knack for the sciences. My mind rejects the essential concepts of physics. The endless intricacies of organic chemistry fail to stick with me. Heaven forbid I'm ever entrusted with a Bunsen burner.

The one saving grace of the field for me, however, is the scientific method—its trajectory neatly arrayed as *question, hypothesis, experiment, analysis, and conclusion*. The conversion of theory into experiment via this process has always fascinated me. I especially appreciate how knowledge can be pursued by a step-by-step process. It is thus less surprising that I, someone usually oriented toward the humanities, am urged to draw a parallel between contemporary art and scientific methodology. An artwork—throughout its inception, creation, and reception—can serve as a vessel for an artist to test and cultivate ideas regarding anything of their choosing. It undergoes its conceptualization, its actualization (material or otherwise), and its analysis as an artistic exploration. To me, an artwork evokes the investigative essence of an experiment in its method, working with a concept and realizing it through sculpture, video, performance, or any other creative medium.

*For Events*, a sculpture by the acclaimed artist and long-time University of Chicago visual arts professor Jessica Stockholder, is a hallmark of the scientific impetus that can drive an artistic project. The piece, an elevated platform made primarily of plywood and fiberglass, was installed outdoors in the Hutchinson Courtyard at the university from April 1 to May 5, 2024. Throughout its tenure in the courtyard, *For Events* was activated by a series of official events organized by its curatorial team and executed by students, faculty, artists, activists, and others from the university community. Whether in its idle state existing outside, or when it hosted performers and invited unofficial ones, *For Events* was a locus of inquiry akin to the scientific—

pursued by its executor (the artist), its participants (the performers), and its environment (passersby at the university). With her creation, Stockholder housed a site of artistic experimentation engaged in the unpredictability of the public sphere.

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#### 0. The hypothetical state

As with any experiment, Stockholder's project is driven by an inquiry into the unknown. In fact, her general motivation for conducting *For Events* is also one that permeates throughout many if not all her works. Stockholder has often preoccupied herself with the public sphere—its frequently nebulous boundaries and uncertain operations—as test subject throughout her artistic practice. Namely, her sculptural and installation works incorporate everyday materials, thereby calling into question how we engage with common items in various contexts. Moreover, her practice contains a distinctive usage of color and magnitude so as to impede on viewers' senses, insofar as they are forced to confront their orientation in the space that they share with her art. Stockholder's work is inherently public work; she questions what it means for something to be public in the first place. She makes inferences about how individuals may encounter and behave around her work, as evidenced by the meticulous configuration of her creative experiments.

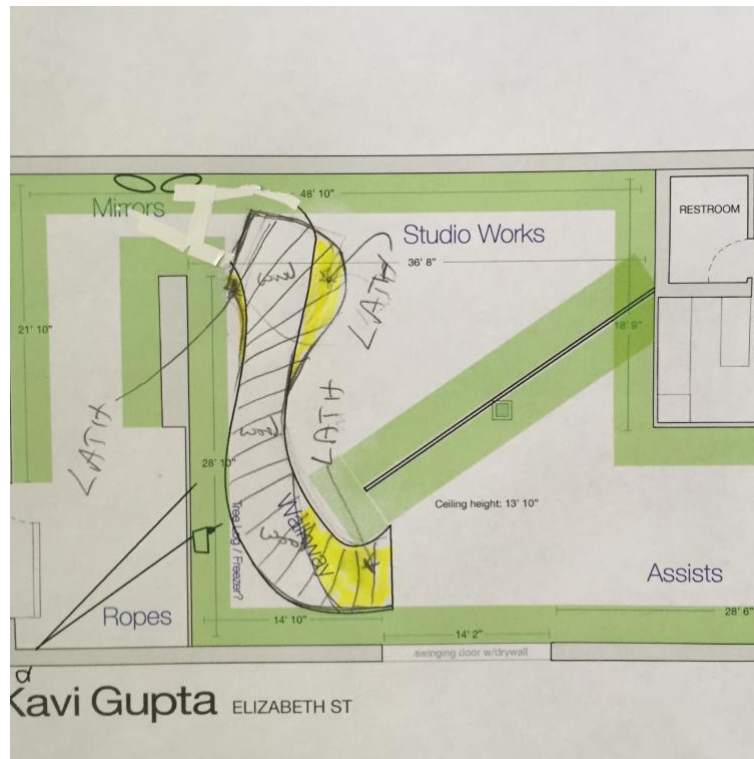
A previous piece in Stockholder's œuvre that particularly involved the public in the aforementioned ways was *Rose's Inclination* (2015–2016), a mixed media work that was installed at the Smart Museum of Art. Specifically, the piece collected accessible materials such as garden mulch and Plexiglass for an assemblage that was centered inside the museum and jutted out into its open outdoor courtyard. The installation simultaneously coalesced into the architecture of the Smart's exterior and made for a unique imposition on the space that art-goers and wanderers alike faced up close. By Stockholder's design, *Rose's Inclination* experimented

with the space it occupied in an effort to see what meaningful interactions with the public could be rendered from its residence.



Jessica Stockholder, *Rose's Inclination*, 2015–2016, Paint, carpet, fragment of Judy Ledgerwood's painting, branches, rope, Plexiglas, light fixtures, hardware, extension cord, mulch, Smart Museum foyer, courtyard, sidewalks, and beyond. Commissioned by the Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago. Courtesy of the artist, Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery, and Kavi Gupta Gallery.

Evidently, Stockholder's practice considers the mysteries surrounding human nature in the public sphere, and specifically asks what happens when art intervenes. This theme is prevalent in the concept of *For Events*. Its theoretical construction can be traced back to a 2015 sketch of its original installation for an exhibition at Stockholder's Chicago gallery, Kavi Gupta. This sketch, along with the work itself, was donated to the Smart Museum on the occasion of Stockholder's retirement from teaching this year. It demonstrates a draft of the experimental design, if you will, with the surrounding public realm at the core of its investigation.



Jessica Stockholder, *For Events*, 2015, instructions to fabricate sculpture in plywood and fiberglass, Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Gift of Jessica Stockholder, Kavi Gupta Gallery and Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery, 2023.<sup>17</sup>

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### I. The inactive state

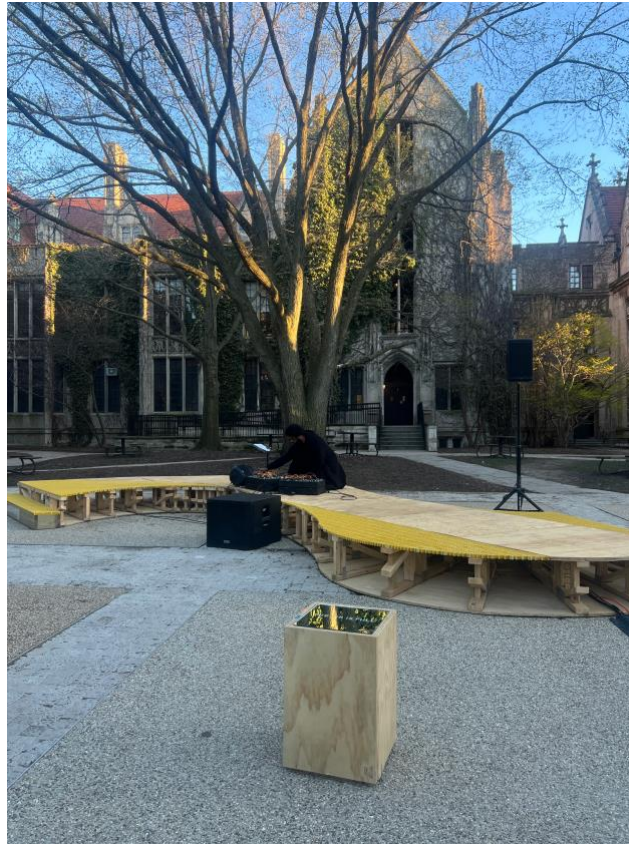
The experimental setup of *For Events* at the University of Chicago was quite peculiar. First, the sculptural object was overtly public. Its elevation exuded importance and demanded the attention of its audience. Its oblong and asymmetrical shape, along with its sheer size, made it difficult to miss even among those adverse to postmodernist art. Furthermore, its chosen location was incredibly intentional; Hutchinson Courtyard is an epicenter of pedestrian traffic and prolonged leisure on the university campus. At the same time, however, the Courtyard is by no means on par with the Main Quad in terms of openness. Rather than being a gateway to the university's main academic buildings, Hutchinson Courtyard primarily services those heading into its anchor building, Reynolds Club, or those just passing through on their way to another

destination. Otherwise, it is rather secluded but still accessible to university community members and the general wandering public, making for an interesting potentiality regarding who encounters the installation. The public form of the *For Events* sculpture itself also facilitated its particular conditions. As dictated by Stockholder, the object was to be installed such that anyone could interact with it. Additionally, a wide variety of programming on the platform was to occur throughout its installation period, organized by its curators and open to all. Standing on its own, sans activation and sans impromptu participants, *For Events* as object contained these qualities and possibilities that allude to the aspects of public life it aims to address.

During periods of inactivity (that is, without any activation, official or otherwise), the aura of *For Events* was surely felt among the individuals that came across it. The attention of those who walked by unbeknownst of its identity or purpose was inevitably provoked, their curiosity communicated by turns of the head, quick glances, and even lengthy stares. A few even demonstrated a hesitant desire to investigate the structure further, at times approaching with such caution as if the platform were a radioactive substance. The work was an intervention on the University of Chicago campus, alerting those who encountered it, even students that were mindlessly hustling on by to their next commitments, of an unusual presence in their shared space.

The degree to which this interjection remained with an individual varied widely, leading some to explore the artwork and others to forget about it immediately after their initial encounter. Moreover, as the installation progressed, the impact of the platform on its surroundings also varied over time. The platform became a motif in the daily routine of passersby as it persisted in the courtyard. After a while, it almost managed to assimilate into the environment, while

concurrently remaining an irregularity. As such, the installation of *For Events* enlivened its ecosystem via its encounters with its experimental subject: the public.



Artist Kevin Beasley performs a sound piece entitled *Plastic/Soul/Capture/Play - Notes in Public* on the *For Events* platform.

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## II. The performance state

*For Events* qua artwork was primarily actualized via the series of scheduled performances that occurred on the platform. Some primarily involved sound, such as a live electronic music orchestration conducted by artist Kevin Beasley. Others were more theatrical, like the improvisational performance of *Hansel and Gretel, a collective tribute to Pope.L* by *DoVA* alumni. Several events were interactive, like *freemeditation* by visual arts graduate students shaman and feifei and *For (Dance) Events: An Exploratory Movement Workshop* led by UChicago Social Sciences staff member Lauren Sheely. Additional activations engaged in

political demonstration, including *VOX CLAMANTIS IN CHICAGO* by the artist Anna Tsouhlarakis.

By fulfilling the established purpose of the sculpture as a sort of venue for happenings, the performances that occurred during the tenure of *For Events* could be thought of as experiments in their own right. Each perpetuated their own motives and explorations, whether through sound, speech, performance, or other formats. They also garnered a wide spectrum of participation, with some audience members (pre-meditated or impromptu) viewing or even interacting with the events occurring. Many individuals, on the other hand, imposed their own exclusivity from the events. Although Stockholder never established any degree of privacy for the *For Events* happenings, as this is evidently counterintuitive to her project, those who unknowingly encountered the events oftentimes neglected to join in an otherwise public event. Their unawareness of the project's nature seemingly led them to assume their inability to participate. Due to its peculiar situation in Hutchinson Courtyard, *For Events* cultivated several layers of public versus private and inclusion versus exclusion among the public that perceived it, especially during its scheduled activations.

One event that engaged with many such layers was *Lived With*, a durational performance by visual arts undergraduate student Jake Quinlan. This event involved Quinlan living on the platform for 24 hours, from noon on April 20 to noon on April 21. The only condition was that at least one person, the performer or anyone else, had to occupy the platform for the entire duration of the performance. In other words, for the performer to leave the platform, someone had to temporarily inhabit it in their place.





Artist Jake Quinlan speaks with someone on the *For Events* platform during their 24-hour performance entitled *Lived With*.

Quinlan's self-inflicted condition garnered varying levels of attention, interaction, or neither from the multitudes of passersby. As such, it provided the otherwise uncommon chance to speak with audience members about the artwork as it was being executed.

In one of my own engagements with Quinlan's performance, I held down the fort while they left to pick up some much-needed sustenance. During this brief moment, I was lucky enough to attract one visitor to the platform, who hovered around its vicinity before I was instinctively prompted to break the fourth wall between us with a greeting. We proceeded to chat about the performance and Stockholder's sculpture. Off pure chance, I was thereby inserted into a position of authority and even responsibility to advocate for Quinlan's project. And this



seemingly became a shared endeavor between Quinlan and many of those who encountered the piece.

Additionally, regardless of their own survival preparations prior to the event, Quinlan's circumstance inspired the outreach of communal aid—in the form of food, water, blankets, and more—from many a friend, acquaintance, or even mere stranger. Non-material forms of care arose during the performance as well. In fact, *Lived With* happened to have taken place around the time when the first Pro-Palestine encampment protests were emerging on various college campuses across the country. Given the rising movement, and Quinlan's concurrent yet different kind of campus inhabitation, various students actually brought it up to them throughout the performance. Thus, *Lived With* fostered such moments of sincere discourse between performer and viewer on a public stage (literally). Much to the artist's surprise, their individual 24-hour long task manifested in a community-wide experience. Ultimately, the piece reflected on elements of social expectation, care, and chance.

Through events like *Lived With*, Stockholder's platform provided an interesting double-edged sword. It opened the opportunity for performers to engage in their own experimentations of any sort while concurrently executing the overall trial that was *For Events*. In Quinlan's case, they pursued their thesis surrounding endurance and convention, involving the participation of additional bystanders in the process. By doing so, the overarching motive of the platform—that is, to host the potential for happenings and witness their public fulfillment—was also advanced. The platform therefore contained a unique capability of realizing its own artistic significance and facilitating that of the happenings it supported. Consequently, *For Events* amounted to an experiment abundant in meaning.

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### III. The natural state

Early into the installation of *For Events*, some crayon sketches emerged on its wood surface. It appeared as though a group of kids imposed their own creative volition on the object, jumping at the opportunity to quite literally make their mark. While the parameters regarding alterations of the platform were undefined by Stockholder, the legality of the children's craft was nonetheless unclear. Some might go so far as to say it was vandalized. Others would say it speaks to the very essence of the artwork. What can truly be asserted given this wholesome act of spontaneity is that the kids channeled the interactive aspect of *For Events*, albeit more directly than others might be inclined to do.

An inherent quality of scientific experiments lies in this example: no matter how much you premeditate the test conditions and define the strict parameters of your variables, surprises are always possible. Outliers can happen. As much as interaction with *For Events* was encouraged by Stockholder, drawing on the platform was unpredictable. And for an artist engaging in their own artistic experiments, the things that arise unexpectedly can at times even be the most compelling. It's the interplay between the expected and unexpected that drives the scientific undercurrent of artistic explorations like Stockholder's.

*For Events*, in its natural state, invited spontaneous activations outside of those previously established by the artist and curatorial team. By the end of the installation, its most frequent activations were actually the most casual. Hungry students used its surface area as extra lunch seating during peak hours. Children adapted it as a makeshift playground. Local artists took upon the rare opportunity of being able to inspect an art object up close. The most unpredictable dependent variable in the experiment that *For Events* conducted lied in these

impromptu physical interactions and how the public would choose to stand, sit, or even draw on a soapbox now that they had been given one.

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*For Events* stood as an incubator for artistic exploration during its time on the University of Chicago campus. An experiment in public engagement was enacted by a structural anomaly presiding in an open space. And yet, among the various facets of the experimental ethos within Stockholder's project, is her central question clear? Does she as the artist have a singular theory to test via her project? Must she necessarily establish one that is evidently defined?

Here's where the difference between artistic and scientific experimental methodology appears most prominently, at least in my view. Science denotes a certain aspect of our natural world as its subject of inquiry, whether it be the diet of an animal or the behavior of a compound. However, I'm not so sure the same could be said of explorations via art. After all, Stockholder's concept is one thing, yet it's malleable insofar as it considers how individuals interact and perceive it. Experimentation via art as such is inherently social, and therefore not limited to a singular question but rather the interpretations of its viewers. Art, unlike science, does not serve to extract fact from theory. Rather, it renders wide-ranging, even infinite interpretations of and interactions with a subject.

The installation of *For Events* in Hutchinson Courtyard was an experimental inquiry into what comprises the public realm of human experience—an inquiry that perhaps left us with more questions than answers.