

midday / Leslie Hewitt  
2009





### An excerpt from Esperanza Rosales’s “A Historical Pause”: an essay exploring notions of rest and the representation of time in Leslie Hewitt’s recent work

HERE, EVEN THE MOUNTAINS ONLY SEEM TO REST, UNDER THE LIGHT OF THE STARS; THEY ARE SLOWLY, SECRETLY DEVoured BY TIME; NOTHING IS FOREVER, IMMORTALITY HAS FLED THE WORLD TO FIND AN UNCERTAIN ABODE IN THE DARKNESS OF THE HUMAN HEART THAT STILL HAS THE CAPACITY TO REMEMBER AND TO SAY: FOREVER.  
—HANNAH ARENDT, ‘BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE.’<sup>1</sup>

Nothing stays the same and everything always changes.

New York-based artist Leslie Hewitt’s work is fixated on representing impermanence and passage of time.<sup>2</sup> Hewitt’s photo-sculptures are constructed from personal items including found elements, handwritten scraps of paper, vintage family photographs, and often times books relating to the Black protest movements of the 1950s and 1960s. The elements are presented as a series of photographs incorporated into ever-changing assemblages that the artist photographs, rearranges and then photographs again.

As Andrea K. Scott has aptly noted, Leslie Hewitt’s work deals with the inevitability of change.<sup>3</sup> Two remarkably similar photographs, *Untitled (Epiphany of Circumstance)* [2006–2008] make clear the central roles that change and the operation of chance occupy in Hewitt’s work. The same arrangement of objects are photographed twice with no discernibly visible difference, except perhaps for nearly imperceptible adjustment of light in the shadows.

Seventeenth century Northern European vanitas paintings embody an almost romantic fascination with the impermanence of life and utilized physically concrete objects to symbolize transience in a single image. Hewitt’s materialist re-workings and rearrangements of objects are generally presented as sets of photographs that represent a seriality of views. These series suggest a nearly infinite interchangeability of forms and numerous possibilities for the arrangement of objects that approaches the notion of a historical pause, that represents the undocumented moments in and around the moments pictured.

This notion of interchangeability in Hewitt’s work can be connected to trade, an economy of knowledge, access and the labor indirectly represented by the objects she selects to photograph. This historical concept of objecthood and the artist’s relationship to the object is a crucial link to the work.

Hewitt draws a link between the exploitation of labor indirectly represented by the goods of trade in the 17th century [especially Dutch] still life with the objects incorporated into her assemblages that at times directly refer to the civil rights and Black consciousness movements. In this configuration, the literature namely—the social, intellectual and political books interwoven into her sculptures—becomes the freely moving units in a personal-political economy of objects. Her assemblages incorporate the grain of wood, the yellowed pages of first edition books, and faded photographs into a scene that continuously changes. Together, these works whisper quiet volumes about the ‘not-at-all-hidden’ status ‘of neocolonialism as an old story and a continuing reality’ as one reviewer has said.<sup>4</sup>

*Make it Plain* [2006], Hewitt’s contribution to the 2007 Whitney Biennial, depicts five vastly different arrangements of the following objects: a family photograph, an empty easel, and books including Joanne Grant’s *Black Protest* and the Kerner Commission’s 1968 report on urban rioting in American cities. Various combinations of hierarchy and relations are tried and tested in each of the photographs with different configurations picturing the books stacked or piled, or an easel balancing or acting as a support to other objects. As the title suggests, the absence of glass within the wooden frames that outline the photographs of *Make it Plain* seems to be a motion for a clarity beyond transparency, but Hewitt’s photographs are anything but transparent. They seem to acknowledge the shortcomings inherent in two-dimensional representation, the difficulty and spatial deviation of translating a sculpture into a photograph—as well the inability of photography and image making in general to accurately represent a cogent reality of objecthood, time or space.

These temporal arrangements communicate a value system based on the historical significance of objects.

They suggest meaning created by juxtapositions, in which the treatment and balance of objects synthesizes possible subtexts or suggests something beyond allegorical pictorialization: a reference to time.

Hewitt’s work has been said to pose questions about ‘the conundrum of the past and its connection to the contemporary moment.’<sup>5</sup> In *Midday* [2009], Hewitt’s latest series, a mandarin orange sits next to a copy of *Manchild in the Promised Land*, a nearly autobiographical account of the challenges of urban life for African Americans in 1950s New York.<sup>6</sup> As with Hewitt’s earlier works, elements from the past are placed in relationship to more recent photographs, and thereby introduced into a contemporary context. (In this instance, snapshots of construction sites in Rotterdam and photographs of the interior of an apartment in Harlem, NY mingle with snapshots of the famed outdoor market in Haarlem, The Netherlands; for example). A wooden plank stands in as a ‘blank’ surface. Functioning as a screen, an element disrupts the plane of ‘logic’ or reading and forms a chasm that can be filled with multiple understandings. It is a relatively neutral or wild card element that appears often in Hewitt’s work.

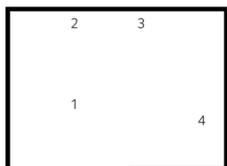
These wooden inclusions are not at all historically unloaded. In material terms, wood is saturated with associations and meanings. But within Hewitt’s work, these platforms, easels and support surfaces of wood function as geometric forms and planes that divide an easy path to linear assessment and serve as momentary obstructions to an arrival at meaning. As the construction of meaning, like the construction of history, often takes place by the layering of multiple elements and events, the need for certain spaces of interruption might be felt. In these ‘neutral’ moments, (represented by the wood) the image ‘stops speaking’ allowing the viewer to form multiple readings, and a chance to complete the thought.

Engaging with post-colonial material poses a complexity in terms of how to reconstruct personal histories in the absence of representation. In attempting to build and re-build relationships through objects, Hewitt pictures a quiet history of sorts by referring to breaks in a timeline. The process of recombining objects is an attempt to articulate beyond what is presently possible, and is perhaps motivated by a desire to formulate a language adequate enough to describe newly emerging, present-day contexts in relation to history by utilizing elements from the past.

Among the numerous interests that these, at times, deliberately mute, mysterious arrangements represent is the question of how to engage with a legacy of protest. This question has also been raised by other contemporary artists, including New York-based artist Douglas Boatwright, whose attempts to recite a composite made from a series of speeches by Black Panther Party member Fred Hampton from memory are frequently interrupted by forgotten lines in *Understudy* (2004), a performance on video.<sup>7</sup> In this work, the artist appears as an actor, essentially learning the speech while performing it. The interruption exacted by Boatwright’s forgotten lines relates to the notion of the pause in Hewitt’s work and raises equally salient questions about the possibility for engaging with radical historical material in relationship to memory and time.

In the moments lost between the bright bursts of light from camera flash units or glare from the sun, a potentiality inherent in an unfixated series of arrangements suggest the ability to transcend position. With the subtle suggestion of the passage of time, a series of non-events and reconfigurations and through the personal, Hewitt’s works allow multiple readings. In place of a narrative that details what has taken place, or what has happened, something is quietly taking place in interruptions and moments lost between things.

**Esperanza Rosales** is an artist and writer from New York currently based in Brussels and Rotterdam. Her essay, “Truman’s Hand”, will be included in a forthcoming book by Witte de With publications, and reprinted in an upcoming issue of the art journal *FR. David*. She is the editor of a new bi-monthly publication by Wilfried Lentz gallery in Rotterdam and is currently editing a book by artist Kevin van Braak (NL) for the X Baltic Triennial of International Art in Vilnius (2009).



Checklist/Art Statements:

**1 Untitled (Resist, Resist, Resist ...)**  
2009, concrete, board, bookbinding cloth, paper, suite of three: 14 3/4 x 11 1/2 x 2 inches (37.5 x 29.2 x 5.1 cm), 11 3/4 x 9 3/4 x 2 1/4 inches (29.8 x 24.8 x 5.7 cm), 11 3/4 x 10 x 2 1/2 inches (29.8 x 25.4 x 6.4 cm)  
courtesy of the artist and D’Amelio Terras Gallery, New York

**2 Untitled (Seems To Be Necessary)**  
*Midday* Series, 2009  
Digital c-print in custom maple wood frame  
50 x 60 x 1/8 inches (127 x 152.4 x .3 cm) image size  
52 5/8 x 62 5/8 x 5 inches (133.7 x 159.1 x 12.7 cm) frame size  
courtesy of the artist and D’Amelio Terras Gallery, New York

**3 Untitled (Pyramid)**  
*Midday* Series, 2009  
Digital c-print in custom maple wood frame, 50 x 60 x 1/8 inches (127 x 152.4 x .3 cm) image size,  
52 5/8 x 62 5/8 x 5 inches (133.7 x 159.1 x 12.7 cm) frame size  
courtesy of the artist and D’Amelio Terras Gallery, New York

**4 Untitled (Connecting)**  
*Midday* Series, 2009  
Digital c-print in custom maple wood frame, 50 x 60 x 1/8 inches (127 x 152.4 x .3 cm) image size,  
52 5/8 x 62 5/8 x 5 inches (133.7 x 159.1 x 12.7 cm) frame size  
courtesy of the artist and D’Amelio Terras Gallery, New York

Additional work:  
**Riffs on Real Time, 1 of 10**  
2008, C-print, 40 x 30 inches (101.6 x 76.2 cm)  
courtesy of the artist and D’Amelio Terras Gallery, New York

Front:  
Clockwise from top left  
**Untitled (Geographic Delay)**  
*Midday* Series, 2009  
courtesy of the artist and D’Amelio Terras Gallery, New York

**Untitled (Holding Still)**  
*Midday* Series, 2009  
courtesy of the artist and D’Amelio Terras Gallery, New York

**Untitled (Connecting)**  
*Midday* Series, 2009  
courtesy of the artist and D’Amelio Terras Gallery, New York

**Untitled (Horizon Line)**  
*Midday* Series, 2009  
courtesy of the artist and D’Amelio Terras Gallery, New York

Back:  
**Untitled (Altogether Now)**  
*Midday* Series, 2009  
courtesy of the artist and D’Amelio Terras Gallery, New York

Design: Ronny Quevedo / BASE 2009

1. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight exercises in political thought*, Penguin Classics, New York, 1993, p. 44.

2. In vanitas paintings, fruit, flowers, and skulls pictured were symbols of the impermanence of life. Closed books symbolized knowledge, but also the end of time.

3. Andrea K. Scott, “Art in Review; Leslie Hewitt, Replica of a Lost Original”, Artists Space, New York Times, Published: February 23, 2007

4. Holland Cotter, “Leslie Hewitt’s ‘It’s Just a Feeling...’ and Heather Rowe’s ‘On Returning’ at D’Amelio Terras”, New York Times Published: Friday, December 14, 2007

5. Excerpted from the press release for the exhibition, ‘It’s Just a Feeling...’ November 9–December 23 2007 at D’Amelio Terras gallery in New York.

6. Written as an autobiographical novel, *Manchild in the Promised Land* details author Claude Brown’s transition from childhood to adulthood in Harlem during the 1940s and 1950s. The opening lines of the novel, “Where does one run to when he’s already in the promised land?” refers to New York as a place of false promise for many southern-born African Americans who emigrated north after the Great Depression and as the Oxford University Press companion to African American literature states, uses the exodus – a biblical reference – to phrase a political question. As the sons and daughters of these émigrés, many of the characters in Brown’s novel are inheritors of this question. Written and published in 1965, at the height of the civil rights movement, *Manchild in the Promised Land* is considered a classic of American literature.

7. In his performance, Boatwright delivers as much of the ‘master’ speech as he remembers stopping every time he doesn’t remember the words, then starts from the beginning again, after reviewing the tape that serves as his memory aid. He continues on in this way, remembering new parts of the speech each time he delivers it, until the tape he is performing on runs out. The speech at the center of this work was compiled by the artist from various rallies and interviews that Hampton gave in and around 1968. *Understudy* was presented in a solo exhibition at Silo, the former gallery in New York was located in Freeman’s Alley and was owned and operated Tia Shin from 2004–2007.

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