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Park McArthur Interviewed by Jennifer Burris

In her new exhibition Ramps, artist Park McArthur considers access as more than a public policy question—it's a physical property.

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Park McArthur, *Ramps*, 2014. Installation view at ESSEX STREET, New York.

Park and I first met at the Whitney Independent Study Program in 2010. The discussions and debates we had during this intensive period seem, for me, to have prefigured our correspondence during the four years since. Near-weekly conversations over phone, email, and Skype have continually challenged my own thought processes, while also giving rise to a number of projects on which we collaborated. One project is a book of Park's writing seeded by her performance *Epistle* at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Philadelphia during the fall of 2011, which deployed a series of emotionally charged letters between artist Paul Thek and ICA curator Suzanne Delehanty as a springboard into the poetics and politics of letter writing. This forthcoming book, published by Athénée Press and designed by Jake Hobart, also includes archival black-and-white photographs of stone sculptures created by the artist Beverly Buchanan during the late 1970s and early '80s. Our shared fascination with these little-known images has given rise to a second, ongoing exploration into how Buchanan's life and work contends with the social forces and art historical narratives of post-minimalism and land art.

McArthur's second solo exhibition in the United States, on view at Maxwell Graham's gallery ESSEX STREET through February 23, puts forth a sculptural language that clarifies ideas she has been formulating and refining over the years. The following exchange, on the occasion of this show, took place over two days during the bitter cold of a New York January.

—Jennifer Burris

Jennifer Burris

Ramps, your solo show that opened at ESSEX STREET last Sunday, evokes the book *Beyond Ramps* by activist and writer Marta Russell. What is the relationship between this book and your thinking about the exhibition?

Park McArthur, *Ramps*, 2014. Installation view at ESSEX STREET, New York.

Park McArthur

For some reason, I thought that there was an activist or disability group called *Beyond Ramps*, which worked on justice and access in ways that weren't just architectural. A ramp is the bare minimum: it just gets someone into a place. What about language interpretation? What about childcare? What about transportation or assistance? What about Skype or video technologies, closed captioning, and visual descriptions? How to think about these practices of access in a way that doesn't limit advocacy to the implementation of a ramp or elevator? A year or so ago, I was searching for

this phrase—“beyond ramps”—and Marta’s book came up. Maybe I had heard the title and repressed it, and then it came back through a Google search in that weird way that the Internet operates. It was published in 1998 by Common Courage Press. It was something I needed to read.

My show isn’t a show about ramps. It is a show of ramps that surveys the three years since I moved to New York; my interactions with the different art institutions that created portable ramps outside their buildings. It’s a show composed of these temporary fixes to structures that are ultimately inaccessible and will remain inaccessible, either because these places don't have the funds to do an overhaul, or because there are architectural incentives to not change their entryways. Or because their inaccessibility is not just about steps. There is also one ramp that is not part of the inside installation at ESSEX STREET, which is the newly-poured concrete slab that fills in the space between the storefront gallery’s main entrance and its landing. And so the way that the book relates to the exhibition is by underscoring the fact that I don’t want to reinforce thinking about ramps as the be-all and end-all of what access looks like.

Marta’s book is very much about the economic conditions that both produce and reproduce disability. It’s a polemic on the limitations of a liberal, anti-discrimination politics that don’t really get to the source of social and economic injustice. If you’re only prioritizing as many jobs as possible for disabled people then you’re saying that employment is the solution, rather than thinking, OK, we have an economic structure based only on people who can be productive within these very limited set of criteria. What about people who will never meet these criteria? To say nothing of the criteria that will never meet these people. Does this mean that we shouldn’t have a support structure for them? So the main idea behind her book is that disabled people are basically the canaries in the coalmine for a whole host of welfare infrastructure and social contracts that are currently dissolving: conditions that we have only seen accelerate in the fifteen years since the book was published.

Park McArthur, *Ramps*, 2014. Offsite installation view.

JB

It reminds me of our earlier conversation about your relationship with the different art institutions that built these ad-hoc ramps upon your request and then later loaned them for your current exhibition. On the one hand, after you contacted them, all these different spaces were very receptive to coming up with solutions that provided some means of physical access. But, on the other hand, that accessibility depended on you very explicitly and actively

reaching out to them. How can we question this causal dependency of physical access on individualized advocacy?

PM

Particularly because that causal relationship requires you—a person—to have the time and space and energy to advocate for yourself. And of course the show doesn't represent all the places that said: "No, we don't have a ramp." It doesn't show how my participation at other places means getting carried up stairs, an event that requires multiple people's work and organizing efforts.

You know, these ramps have been in my studio for a number of months leading up to the exhibition so that I could work out some of the installation questions that I had. When I first borrowed them, I asked all of the different organizations to call me if they needed them back for someone to use, and I didn't hear anything from anyone. We can speculate as to why that is and why it remains a basically one-to-one relationship with me. Maybe other people aren't using them because they don't know that these ramps exist, which is one of the reasons why we asked all of the lending institutions to put these immediately recognizable handicap signs in their window. But it really is a complaint-driven process. Physical access is not something that organizations have taken upon themselves to figure out outside of governmental pressure, largely. It would be great if different institutions made a decision to say that you are valuable to me as someone close to art or as someone part of a culture. And I don't just want you here because you represent a new consumer base, which is the other reason besides governmental pressure that places become more accessible.

JB

It is a strange thought that the most accessible spaces are those most driven by consumption, particularly when you translate that for an art economy.

PM

I think about this living in New York. I live in the East Village where the sidewalks and curb cuts improve as new elevator buildings, billed as luxury apartments, are built. This is a neighborhood where a lot of teardowns and rebuilds occur; where the improvement of sidewalks, curb cuts, bus stops,

and bus lines is in inverse proportion to economic accessibility.

JB

Going back to your show, and this idea of how different groups of people relate to restricted access, I was pretty struck by some people's response to your installation at the opening. The space was so crowded, and the ramps were positioned on the floor in a way that occupied the majority of the gallery. And it became this slightly hostile environment, which a number of people described as almost performative. Even though there were people circling the room and asking everyone not to stand on the works, there were a lot of people at the opening—well-versed in contemporary art, who wouldn't step on a sculpture in other circumstances—basically making the split-second decision to briefly walk across the installation to get to a different part of the room. Was that intended to be an enactment of the limitations of these sculptures?

PM

I hesitate to think that there is a direct correlation there, that a non-disabled person's temporary experience can be equated to the strictures of a disabled person's experience. I certainly wasn't interested in creating "aha" moments for people who don't think about their bodies in space, potentially, as much as disabled people do. Separate from that, if you are walking, you can choose to walk over and in-between ramps that are positioned in a grid on the floor—there are pathways of a sort. The confined space at the opening only meant that it was harder for people who are blind or for people who use wheelchairs, for example, to get around. And this goes for conditions of apprehension as well: if you use a wheelchair or a scooter or a walker, you are never going to have an internal view of the installation. There are photographs of the ramps from a perspective that I have never seen personally. Which is to say, also, that no one experiences the installation from the top-down view that serves very well to document the sculpture itself.

There are still parts of the exhibition's opening that I haven't processed, however. Acts of aggression that I witnessed: people jumping on the ramps rather than just stepping on them to go from one place to another. I

understand that participatory art exists as a phenomenon in contemporary art, and perhaps my installation could have looked like that to someone—objects to touch—but I hadn't anticipated the desire or necessity to walk on the ramps in the ways that they were walked on. I can't help but understand that reaction within the context of the show. Because, for me, the installation felt very imposing: these ramps are apprehending you rather than the other way around, a reversal in the artwork that didn't seem to happen for a lot of other people. I was surprised that people seemed to feel like it was a field into which you could insert yourself, rather than it putting itself onto you.

JB

Because even if this response isn't intentionally aggressive, it's aggression in the form of complete disregard. On the wall facing the installation of the ramps is a vinyl URL of the Wikipedia page you created for Marta Russell, who died during the time period when you were preparing the show. Does that physical marker of her life and body of thought serve as a context in which you want the sculptures to be read?

PM

In a purely affective or charged way I imagined that she was very angry at injustice in the world, and that the installation is sort of like these two proposals that face one another. She did something with her anger, and led people through very specific kinds of analysis. She used her research into the ideologies of eugenics and social Darwinism to better understand current practices of physician-assisted suicide. How do those histories apply to cutbacks in social welfare more generally? I respect and admire and value that channeling of anger. And even though your question of context remains open for me—it is something I need to think more about—I guess I wanted to be close to her somehow, which I understand is an imposing of my own desires.

The other possible relationship lies in the discourse of institutional critique. Marta's work is also critique, hopefully generative critique, and I think that institutional critique in an art economy or an art world can begin to ask what other institutions require questioning. I think that there is a place for these

other forms of critique within galleries, which is why I wanted the URL for Marta's Wikipedia page there. Not just as a place for her biography to exist, but as a centralized site for group-generated content, so that we can see the ways in which her thought changes over time and how her ideas circulate.

JB

I'd like to talk more about how your installation functions within this very specific art history of institutional critique, precisely because it also feels so embedded within an absence of representation in social structures writ large. Art can't just rail against its own walls.

PM

I guess one place to start is Laurie Parsons and Michael Asher. Both have used specific invitations to exhibit as an opportunity to question the operations and use of the gallery, museum, kunsthalle, and classroom—either by making those operations bigger, better, more difficult, or more specific. Their work has also considered these operations in daily, monthly, and yearly timeframes; it senses and shows structures that are already present by both trusting and challenging in situ relations. Art's own walls—the synecdoche used in your question—come from somewhere. Those walls are built and maintained by someone, so any railing reverberates at multiple levels and holds multiple implications.

Some press around the show has focused on how the "costs of the replacement ramps are built into the show," which is both true and untrue. Yes, the places that loaned ramps to the exhibition will get new ramps, but what is more interesting to me is how this process does not represent the agreements, research, and construction behind each individual object. The fact of replacement does not address how many people's work—both paid and unpaid—was needed in order to create ad hoc access where there was non prior. I need to think about this while moving forward.

JB

This question of philanthropy—or the questionable implications of gifting—seems deeply tied to your work: it indicates a system whose precepts are distilled in the gesture of asking ramps to be made specifically for you.

PM

Not to mention my capacity to ask for these things and even my feeling of entitlement to that request.

JB

It doesn't seem like there is a greater social movement fighting for access or a widespread feeling of collective necessity. The proposed solutions always seem to come from an individual or a small group of people; a single philanthropist who gives money to make art spaces accessible. And why is that? Not just in art, but also in the United States more broadly, why are the functions of change so deeply embedded in a neoliberal state of individualized values and personal motivations? And why are the dictates of this philanthropic class so deeply valorized?

PM

That is the issue with the non-profit industrial complex. We can conceive of a whole host of US-based social movements that now employ master's degree students, which require you to have a certain formal education to be a community organizer or to be the visionary person for a group. But there are plenty of people, groups, and institutions fighting for access, as you put it, in really comprehensive and multi-structural ways and it's important to recognize that too.

JB

Perhaps what underlies your show is a questioning of these forms of intervention or one-to-one advocacy.

PM

Perhaps. But I was also thinking about forms of hierarchical production specifically within art. Because art-making quickly recuperates group endeavors into a collective: a label that masks a lot of sexist, racist, and classist moves and then calls it equal and productive. I'm not against hierarchy. My thing is, well, how do we change these boring patterns of supposed meritocracy; they didn't just happen to occur, there are very specific historical forms behind them. I don't understand this spontaneous generation discussion. Let's pretend we're not baffled by it. So, if we need hierarchy, let's just find a way to have more interesting, productive, and

beautiful hierarchies that are incredibly disruptive.

JB

This phrase you just used—the falsity of “spontaneous generation”—is a discussion that also informs the movements of art history; what artists and what forms of art become embedded as iconic is not a surprise. This is a topic that we have been circling a lot recently in relation to our shared research into the stone sculptures that Beverly Buchanan made in the late '70s and early '80s. Maybe we could talk about how you first came across these works?

PM

It was through her artist file at the Whitney; I was researching artist letters in preparation for a public program at the museum tied to the exhibition *I, YOU, WE*. The images I opened were ones that she had sent to her then-gallerist, Jock Truman, when he wanted to propose a show. It was work just making its debut outside of the studio. Black-and-white photographs that she had taken of her own sculptures; small concrete cast objects that looked like ruins or rubble or parts of a chimney of a burned down house. I really liked seeing them as things-in-process, not installation images from an exhibition. It seemed like these images recognized me somehow, as a viewer, and so I sent them to you and it became this extended effort to understand who she was, where she was working, how she fit into different art histories, why this work was being made. It just sort of unfolded from there.

Beverly Buchanan, *Fragments*, c.1977. Whitney Museum of American Art archives.

JB

I think we both became enamored with these enigmatic sculptures, a moment in art history that we hadn't heard about and that didn't seem to exist in popular memory. And we started trying to spool out the economic, social, and historical networks that surround them. Like Beverly's relationship with Truman, who was an assistant to Betty Parsons before starting his own gallery, as well as her relationship with Romare Bearden, who was her mentor when she first arrived in New York in the early '70s. But also the ways that these works evoke memory and trauma in the American South,

particularly as it relates to slavery and the conditions of tenant farmers. These very complex, contentious narratives embedded in forgotten sculptures. And for both of us there seems to be something powerful there that isn't addressed in current discourse, and wasn't addressed in the '70s or '80s, about what forms of representation become recognized within the art world.

PM

What pressures do these sculptures put on the larger subject of land art and post-minimal sculpture? I think that's what we're looking to each other and to other people to help figure out. Her work, to me, looks at the pieces of identity politics that are always already there in minimalism, post-minimalism, or land art, but rarely discussed. I think these sculptures continually point to the support ground structure that de-neutralizes and denaturalizes what these other art movements seem to hold on to.

I'm also looking to Beverly to help me answer some questions about how to create a life as an artist. Beverly moved to New York to get a master's degree in public health at Columbia University. In an interview that we digitized as part of the New Museum's *XFR STN (Transfer Station)* project, she said, "deciding not to go on to pursue my PhD was the hardest decision I ever made." She came from a family of academics, and I'm sure there was pressure to go on. In the same interview she said, "I felt like I was letting women down. I felt like I was letting black women down, but I decided to do art because no one was asking me to do it." And to hear her talk very specifically about career choices and identity was really helpful.

JB

What's interesting is that she felt like she had to make a choice between her activist practice and her artistic one. After her master's degree, she became a public health organizer in New Jersey but believed she had to leave that to focus on her art, whereas now there seems to be more of a blurring in which activism can be an artistic practice. At the same time, these questions of social welfare that informed her everyday experience are embedded in the minimalist objects she was making.

PM

I feel like in Beverly's work you see the turn in identity politics. It doesn't

announce itself as activist, wanting to make the world better in this way or that way. It doesn't come with this whole other artist statement. The objects just sit there, and they make you think about something or remember something. I really like that strategy.

JB

Beyond just sitting there, they hide. She made them in marshes where the waters would rise and on the edges of non-marked roads.

PM

And she didn't even necessarily need them to be artworks. She always collected stones and had them in her pocket, or she would have pieces of clay that she was working on, and then she would get out of her car and put them down when there was something she felt like she should recognize and mark.

JB

There's something compelling about that in relation to the practices we know about from the '80s and '90s, which announce themselves as dealing with identity in very explicit ways. What's interesting for me is why these works—which operate with such a different strategy—are so little known.

PM

This question was clarified for me when I went to a panel discussion for Muriel Rukeyser's 100th birthday at the CUNY Grad Center a couple of weeks ago and someone in the audience talked about how poetry is taught in America based on various chopped-up schools that seem to not overlap. Muriel's work is not very well known because a school of poetry doesn't bind it. There are also very frank reasons: she was a woman, she was outspoken, she was Jewish, and she was a Marxist. She didn't have a close, necessarily male, publishing editor/companion who advocated for her work. I think we have a similar problem in art history. We imagine these sequential, bounded movements. Art seems to succumb to this parsing that's actually not very informative or helpful. And so I think we can point to very specific reasons why Beverly's work isn't as well known.

JB

And in Beverly's case she left New York, and moved back to the South.

PM

Which becomes pretty clear. New York wants to continue making art narratives that are about New York.

JB

Is Beverly's sculptural strategy something you were thinking about when making *Ramps*?

PM

Not really. We make work very differently. For this show, I was thinking a lot about John Knight's 1998 exhibition at American Fine Arts titled *Identity Capital*, when he and Colin de Land went around to different SoHo restaurants where after-art events often happened (for example, Balthazar, Odeon, Bowery Bar), and Knight asked these businesses to donate their floral arrangements to the gallery. In substitution for these floral arrangements, a card was placed in the restaurants that announced the show. The flower arrangements were then placed on the floor of the gallery with a checklist of where they were all from. I wanted this for *Ramps* as well: a checklist that listed the name and address of each institution as a way of calling forth the location's stair or ledge that required a ramp-as-plank or a ramp-as-wedge to be made. This checklist is also a way to point to the individuals who made, purchased, or advocated for the ramps, because *this* work, and all its very specific and different forms of labor, is largely unavailable in the exhibition itself.

Another thought surrounding or draining through the exhibition, which doesn't really fit into our earlier discussion, is the importance of the year 1998: the publication year of *Beyond Ramps* as well as the year of Knight's exhibition. I like that these two things were made in the same year. Another thing I was thinking about was the etymology of the word ramps, which is both animal and gendered. Ramps once meant a four-legged creature rearing back on its hind legs, like a lion or a horse. In fifteenth-century England, the term ramp was also used to describe a rude, boisterous, or untrained girl or woman.

The ramps at ESSEX STREET could have been organized very differently than they are. I ultimately decided not to highlight a number of distinctions that

could have been made through grouping: ramps that my building superintendent made for the apartment I live in; ramps that my friends lobbied for; ramps that I hired someone to make; ramps that an art institution hired someone to make. Knight's exhibition was helpful for me in thinking through these issues of swap, removal, indicator, and indication: all of which are sculptural and social decisions. There is an interview with him where he said he had this idea for his flower exhibition a decade prior, but Colin de Land was the first person who said, yeah, let's do it. I really liked this clear discussion of how the artist and the gallerist work together to make an exhibition happen. Where it isn't just an experiment, but a vested interest in wanting to produce something together.

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