

Marie de Brugerolle talks to artist Jennifer Bolande about how thresholds, filming effects, and peripheral spaces shape her practice. Bolande's research engages the viewer in a "vision in motion," where the precarious borders of language, and strategies for transforming systems of relations, are repeatedly questioned and reframed.

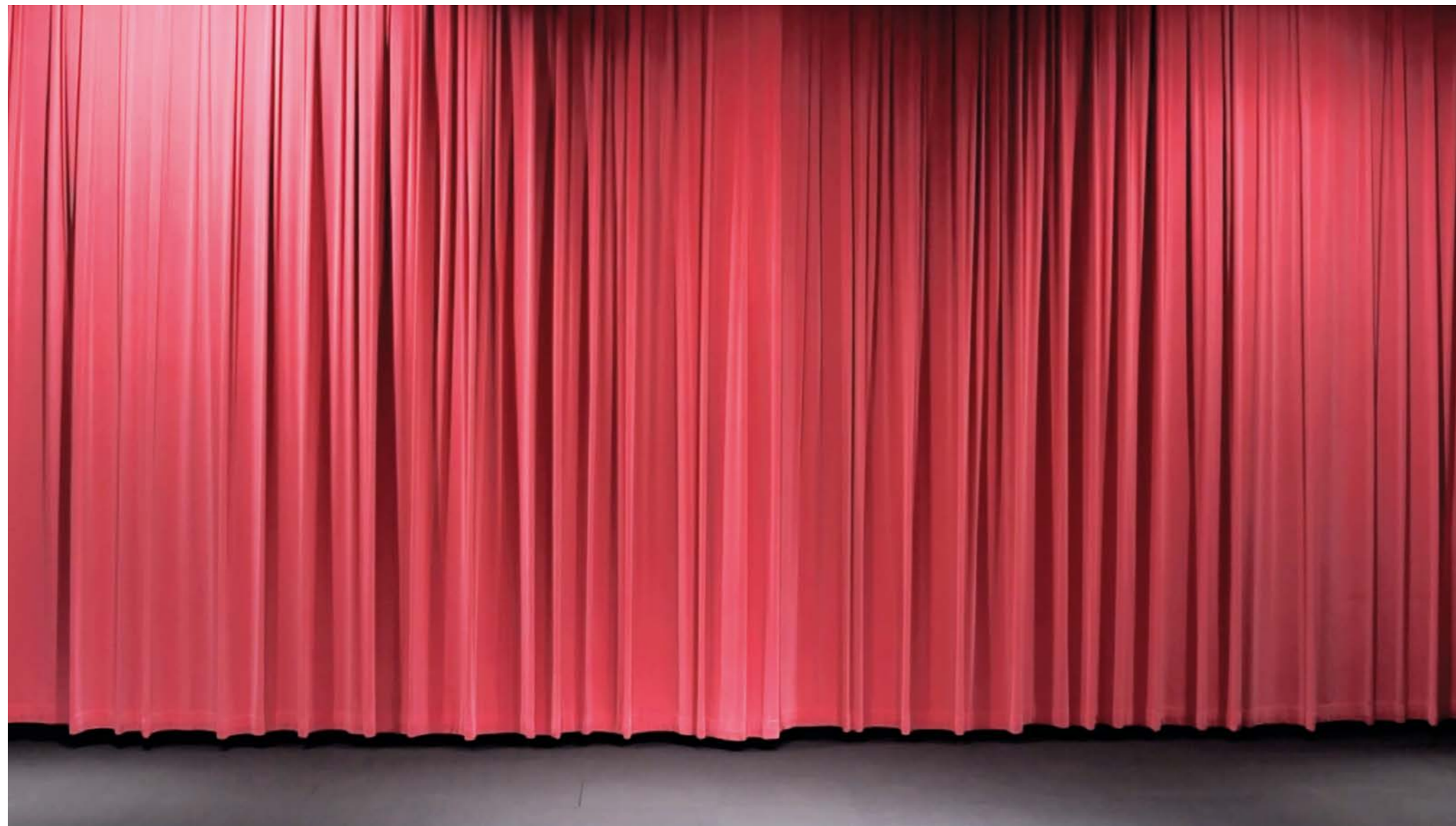
82

83

SCOPING THINGS ON THE

JENNIFER BOLANDE AND MARIE DE BRUGEROLLE
IN CONVERSATION

CUTTING EDGE



MARIE DE BRUGEROLLE

We met some years ago on the occasion of the exhibition *RIDEAUX/blinds* (2015), at Institut d'art contemporain (IAC) in Villeurbanne, France, where I presented your video piece *Pink Curtain*. Part of what I found fascinating about that piece was that it questioned the liminal and is situated on the threshold that exists between spaces and layers of times.

JENNIFER BOLANDE

Thresholds may be my main subject. I love things that exist in more than one realm or move in multiple directions. Often I become interested in things in the process of changing, becoming obsolete, or disappearing.

MDB

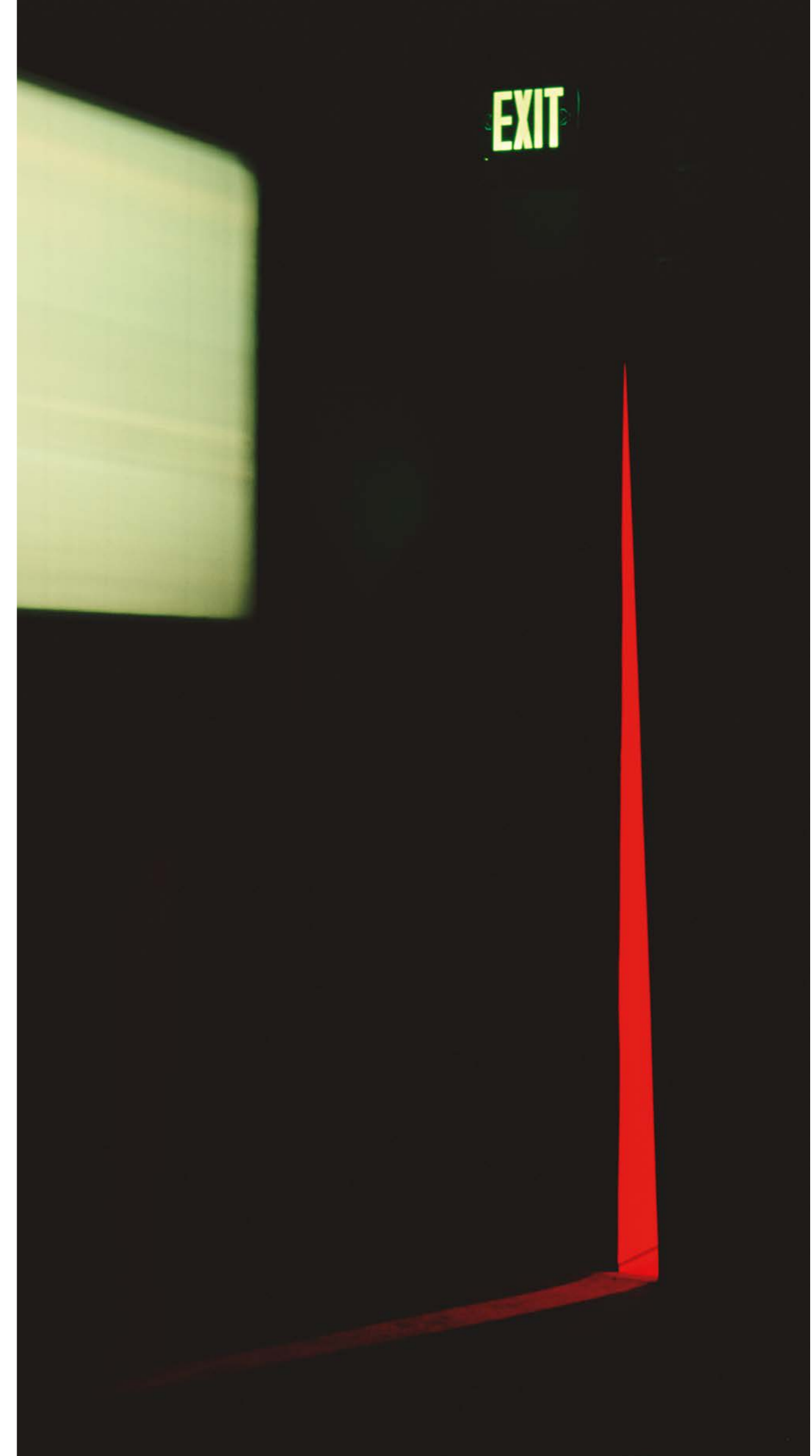
You've spoken about that special moment before a curtain goes up, and your video from 2014, *Pink Curtain*, definitely evokes thoughts about expectation and desire.

JB

Yes, I do love the very beginnings of movies—the opening curtain, the sudden field of color, the titles, the first hints of what is to come. There's a state of suspense and a heightened attention to detail that is lost once the narrative takes over. And curtains certainly fetishize that moment or space of expectation in a big way. In my first show at The Kitchen in 1982, I placed a theatrically lit green velvet curtain opposite a still of one taken from a Warner Brothers cartoon, called *Cartoon Curtain* (1982). The film *Pink Curtain* evokes the shallow space of a tableau. I would love to see it in a theater with an actual curtain opening before it is projected. Maybe we can do this somewhere!

MDB

There might be some confusion in understanding your work as linked to the second "Pictures Generations" and understanding it only through the lens of "rephotography."



Above - *Exit Triangle*, 2010. Courtesy: the artist
Opposite - *Pink Curtain* (still), 2014. Courtesy: the artist

JB When I was at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, I was exposed to Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti's work, and since I had a background in dance, following their example, I set out to integrate dance and art.

I left art school for New York City in 1976 to see if I wanted to pursue art or dance, which I'd practiced since childhood. While I was there, I studied dance at Merce Cunningham Studios, interned at Artists Space, and went to a lot of performances—art performance, dance, avant-garde theater, experimental music, and punk shows. This was also when I saw the *Pictures* exhibition at Artists Space, and I was influenced by Jack's Goldstein work in particular. At this point I made a sharp turn away from dance and began an inquiry into media culture, collecting and rephotographing images from books, magazines, and films. At the time, I prided myself on my extreme cropping and thought of myself as a kind of picture editor. I assembled pictures into sets, families, and sequences, interested in syntax and the movement between images almost as much as the images themselves. The pictures often featured a shallow theatrical space in which objects and backgrounds shifted roles from one image to the next; the "main character" in one became the background in the next. By reframing or displacing "the main event," I found ways of shifting the narrative and revealing latent meanings. Eventually these sequences of pictures grew so long that it seemed as though I'd better start making films or do something else. Around 1984 I began to use different strategies to bring pictures back into physical space to elicit an embodied understanding or response.

The move into three dimensions enabled me to bring back elements of dance that I still cared about—theatricality, gesture, kineshetics, orientation in space. I also realized that photographs could be used not only as pictures but as sculptural material. I was interested in the choreography of viewing, and how we encounter and understand things. The gallery for me then became a kind of theater for sculptures that doubled as sets and as vaguely anthropomorphic characters.

MDB

Your piece from 1987, *Milk Crown*, refers to a photograph by Harold Edgerton, *Milk Drop Coronet*, that was taken with a stroboscope in 1957. That photograph had links to the cinematic research conducted by people like Eadweard Muybridge, and, jumping forward, we can relate it to John Baldessari's attempts to catch specific moments in some of his work. Both of those connections beg the question: is this making an image or taking an image? I think that you make images and give shape to images in what could be described as a sculptural, *mise-en-scène*, postcinema process. You're setting a glance, literally giving a form to this process.

JB

There is a kind of framing of gestures and movement in my work, which may have something to do with my roots in dance. My works are like frozen movies.

As in Edgerton's photographs, time is frozen or held open. The "held-open space," is a staked-out zone, where time is paused or extended. Although most of my works are static, there is always an event happening in proximity—something either just happened or is about to happen. That event could happen physically, perceptually, connotatively, or imaginatively. *Milk Crown* conjures an event and photography without showing either. There's an awareness that this form exists, even though most of us have never seen it and *could* never see it without strobe photography. Something happens between the mental image and the physical object that has relevance in space and in time. We understand the photograph as one moment in a progression, but the sculpture remains solidly in the present.

MDB

About the recent "stack" sculptures: are they in plaster? Their white color and smooth texture, along with their uncommon height, give them a kind of ghost/human quality.

JB

There have been so many works of mine with stacks: stacks of film frames, speaker cabinets, appliances, shims, and movie marquees, just to name a few. I am interested in the simple gesture of stacking and also in things that accumulate. I also really love lists.

The recent stack sculptures, called *News Columns*, (2016–18) were made from 3D scans of stacks of the *New York Times*, which



were then made in different materials. They *are* kind of ghostly. Like ghosts, stacks of newspaper are the type of thing that you might overlook, lurking in the corner of a room! Their white surface likens them to architectural columns, plinths for classical sculpture, or perhaps tombstones. With these and other recent works, I've been investigating the newspaper physically, allegorically, and literally as a vertical accretion of history—as a physical form on the verge of extinction.

MDB

In one of our conversations, you made the comment, "I'm interested in the mediating layers between what we see, what is behind what we see, and what is glimpsed from the corner of the eye." Can you develop this idea?

JB

I want to articulate the travel between and through images, revealing the microlayers of meaning that exist between us and what we see and experience. As we've discussed, much of my work hovers between things, between media, but it also draws attention to what *else* is there—invisible things like expectations, memories, cultural codes, preconceptions, and projections. What's actually there? What is there in the margins that colors our understanding? It's not always clear what the main event is.

I think that's the job of artists, really: to study and articulate the embedded meanings carried by forms and materials we use to navigate the behaviors, narratives, models, technologies, and structures that condition human consciousness. I think art is ultimately a kind of medicine to produce cultural alchemy.

MDB

Movie Chair (1984) remains a masterpiece to me. A wooden chair is installed on a white cube used as a pedestal, and the red velvet of the chair seat supports a bronze sculpture of two intersecting cones. The cones evoke the summits of the Paramount image. The two lamps placed on each side of the chair are attached to mike stands. Looking at it again and again, it fascinates me. I was thinking about the cones' intersection theory but also Donald Judd's essay "It's Hard to Find a Good Lamp" (1993). The object becomes the star, the icon.



Above - *News Column no.2*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Federico Spadoni
Below - *Movie Chair*, 1984. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Charlie Deets
Opposite - *Milk Crown*, 1987. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Ellen Wilson





Visible Distance / Second Sight, 2017, installation views of a site-specific project, Palm Springs, CA, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Desert X, Palm Springs, CA. Photo: Lance Gerber

JB Yes, that's one of my favorite pieces also. The confusion between what is the "set" and what is the "star," as you put it, was deliberate. It's not really clear how to orient oneself in relation to the piece. Is the chair merely a pedestal for the mountains, are both a small part of an overall mise-en-scène, or is it an ad hoc set for a photo shoot? *Movie Chair* is also a model and kind of compendium of the moviegoer's experience—the "movie mountains," among other things, are a diagram of the cone of vision intersecting with the cone of the projector beam.

MDB The cone shape comes back often: *Speaker II* (1986), *Times Square Cone* (1989)... We spoke about it when we met in January.

JB Cones are an analogue for vision, for focus or projection, and in the two works mentioned above, they have a bodily aspect as well. In other works, I've used them in relation to perspective, or [as] amplifiers of meaning or sound. There are a lot of geometric solids in my work! As Cézanne said, the world is made of cubes, spheres, and cones.

MDB It seems that the ideas of analogy and decoy are two main aspects of your work: I'm thinking specifically about the pieces *Plywood Curtains*, from 2008, and *Exit Triangle*, from 2010. A decoy traps the viewer in an experience of fakery at the same time that it makes the viewer conscious of this lie; for me, those two artworks left me thinking about trickery, traps, and the suspension of disbelief.

JB Analogy and decoy, absolutely! I don't know about trickery, but I do like surprises and double takes. It's maybe the opposite of expectation, presenting something you did *not* expect to see at the periphery of attention. The project *Plywood Curtains* also registered a particular moment in time—it was made in response to the economic downturn of 2008, when the numerous closed and vacated buildings and storefronts had visibly changed the face of Los Angeles. I photographed sheets of plywood and printed them to scale on fabric and installed the curtains in multiple storefront windows across the city. At a glance, while driving by, plywood in a window registers as a sign of construction or destruction, perhaps something to avoid looking at. The curtains invited a double take. It's something like a low-tech special effect: what you first thought was flat and solid changed into something dimensional and mobile, possibly signaling an opening rather than a closing.

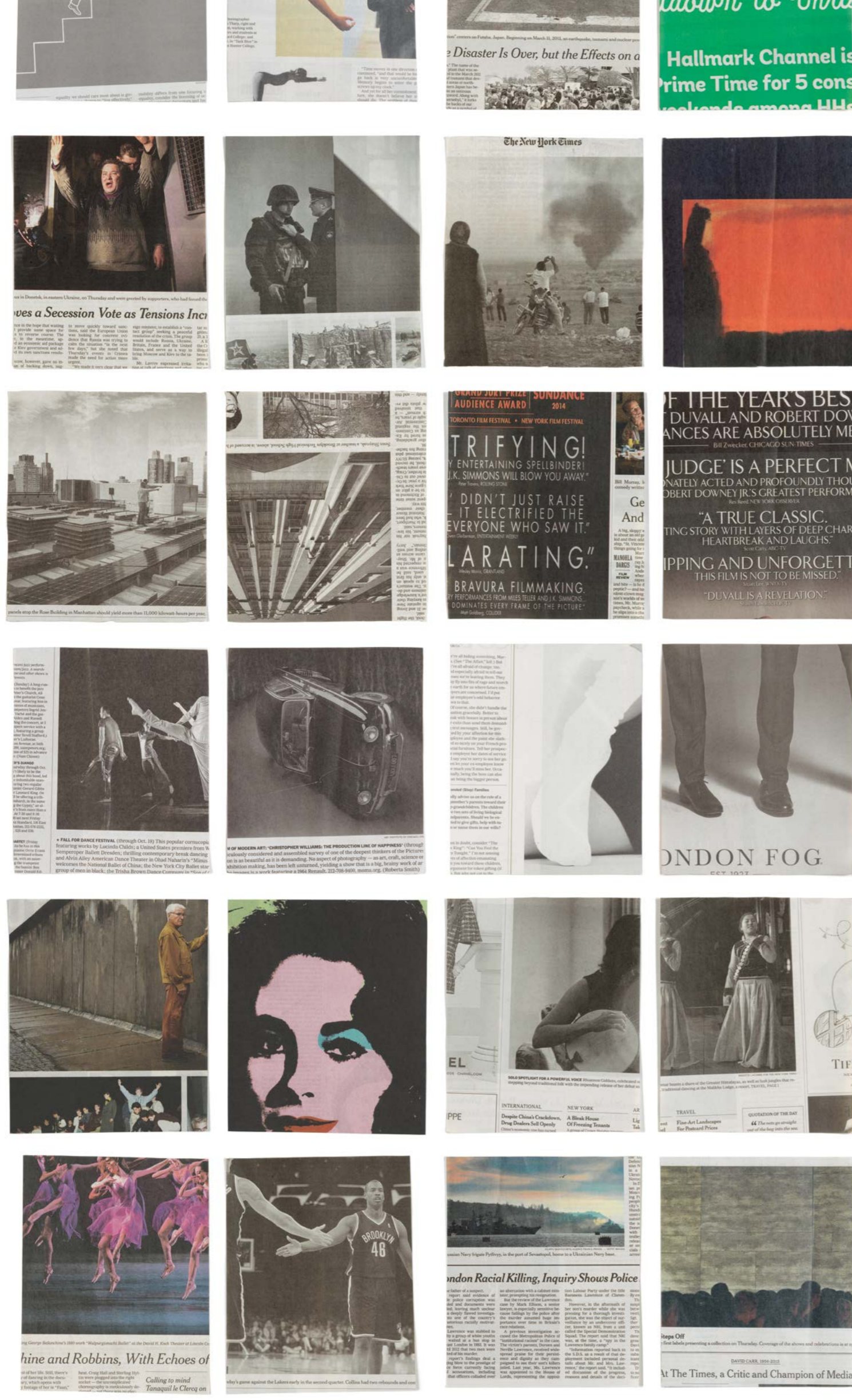
MDB Your site-specific project of 2017, *Visible Distance / Second Sight*, was meant to be experienced from the window of a moving car, and it operated as both a landscape and an experience and ultimately ceased to be a still image. The piece consisted of six billboards in the Coachella Valley with photographic reproductions of the mountains that stand behind them; when the horizon line matches the reproduction perfectly, the billboard disappears.

JB *Visible Distance* had something to do with the desire to see what is just out of reach, or at a distance. It was both a road trip and a road movie! The idea came from noticing the rhythm of the evenly spaced billboards on that road and the anticipation it produced. I couldn't help but look at each of them, wondering what was coming next, even if the ad images were banal. My project was a way of erasing the billboards by replacing them with previews of the landscape beyond. Again there's a double take and also something seen from the corner of the eye. The choreography involved in photographing the mountains for this piece was actually quite challenging to figure out! I love the oscillation between the past and present, the pictured and the actual, that happened as you drove by.

MDB In watching your film of 2015, *Set { } Piece*, I found myself wondering if you regard pieces such as this as Structuralist films. *Set { } Piece* explores the phenomenon of recognition that's simultaneously contradicted as we watch women reading on different floors of a building. How did you create this piece?

JB In a sense, the recent films are variants of Structuralist film, as well as a return to choreography for me. The structure may be

Marie de Bruggerolle is independent curator, writer, professor (France, Czech Republic, Los Angeles). She organized the first retrospectives of Allen Ruppersberg, CNAC, Magasin, Grenoble (1996), John Baldessari, Carrée d'art, Nîmes (2005) and Larry Bell, Carré d'art, Nîmes (2010). She rediscovered Guy de Cointet (1934–1983) and curated Guy de Cointet's first global exhibition *Who's That Guy?*, MAMCO, Geneva (2004) and *Faire des choses avec des mots/Making Words With Things*, CRAC Sète (2006). She co-curated with Dora García *I was a Male Yvonne de Carlo*, MUSAC, Léon (2011–12), *LA EXISTANCIAL*, LACE, Los Angeles (2013), *ALL THAT FALLS*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2014), *RIDEAUX/blinds*, IAC, Villeurbanne, (2015), *Le Petit A de O*, a tribute to a "A" by Olivier Mosset and Cody Choi, Culture Cuts, MAC, Marseille (2016), and *Le Salon Discret*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2017).



There was something about this point of view—looking up at and looking down into—that intrigued me. The newspaper clipping, which eventually yellowed in my archive, spoke of history in another way. The sculpture I ultimately made, *Image Tomb* (2014), moves in two directions at once—there’s a stacking up and a tunneling down. I cut a deep channel through a stack of newspapers, excavating down to the picture of the skeletons below. I was thinking about history as a vertical accumulation of layers, and also about the trajectories of images. I was imagining the possibility of an end in the life of an image.

That piece was the beginning of a large body of work that has moved through various forms and media over the past five years: sculptures, photographs, books, and finally the film, *The Composition of Decomposition*. The film is a journey through a stack of newspapers, a record of the near past, a form of media archaeology. As I excavated through the stack of the *New York Times* to make *Image Tomb*, I retained, in order, all of the removed sections, took that inner stack and opened it (as one would open a book), and photographed each spread. This process is what produced the juxtapositions of images that appear in the film. *The Composition of Decomposition* is made up of around 400 image pairs, which appear and fade in a rhythmic flow. The juxtapositions produced by this chance procedure are often quite startling, and the transitions and relationships between images, as well as their accumulated impact, were fascinating to me. The cut I made through the newspaper ignored the narrative and hierarchical structures that denote importance and harness attention, which put everything on equal footing. Inconsequential slivers of information are beside things of great consequence or supposed importance.

Weirdly, there are a lot of extreme croppings, which echo back to my early work, only here occurring by chance rather than by design.

MDB
I was wondering about the historical point of view and analysis of daily news. The amazing fact is that anything, information and commercials, images and text, creates a visual event. I was thinking about Roland Barthes’s analysis of *fait divers* and “daily mythology,” and I was thinking that your work reveals the process of the making of history.

JB
I am interested in that point when a thing loses its sociocultural moorings and acquires an ambiguous history, when vestiges of the meaning or import it once had are still present, but fading. The physical newspaper—and possibly news itself—is at such a moment in its history. It’s important to note that the stack of newspapers I used as source material dated from 2013 to 2015, just prior to the run-up to the US election of 2016, so the piece is also a record of a pivotal period in history.

One of the things I love about the film is that, watching it, I am given a slow, sustained ride through and look at changes taking place in the way I read and process information now. What happens when something passes from one form of media to another, from news to history? The film carries vestiges of the architecture of the newspaper, but it’s experienced on a screen and produces an experience distinct from both print and online news but reflective of both.

simple and transparent, yet the experience is more than the sum of its parts. I love work that draws attention to the process of perceiving or reading, as much as whatever the “content” might be. *Set { } Piece* began when I noticed this odd building with curtains in a sequence of similar but subtly different windows. The windows were evocative of both stage sets and film frames, and I imagined placing characters into them. I positioned four women with similar hairstyles—parted in the middle, like curtains—in each of the window frames and had them holding books and occasionally turning pages. The piece consists of a number of vertical pans that begin at street level, then move up the facade of the building into the night sky. The gesture of page turning is both a marker of time and a rhythmic element that punctuates the continuously panning camera. The takes are similar yet subtly different, so it’s at once episodic, sequential, and cyclical. I showed *Set { } Piece* to James Benning, and he said it reminded him of Hollis Frampton’s *Zorn’s Lemma* (1970), which is a film that I love, so that was a great compliment. Like James Benning, Bill Leavitt has studied mathematics extensively, and a few years ago he asked me if I thought about set theory in mathematics; he saw a kind of mathematical quality in the way I was recombining sets of elements with overlapping members and creating correspondences between one set and another. I have a hazy and not altogether pleasant memory of being taught set theory in grade school, and I’ve always thought more in terms of grammar, syntax, and semiotics. But Bill’s question made me realize how much of my work is, in fact, engaged with math and geometry.

MDB
In recent years, film has become an increasingly prominent part of your work. Can you talk a bit about how you’ve moved from objects to film?

JB
I have used one-shot films and loops in installations over the years, but *Set { } Piece* was the first film I edited. I think that many of my ideas are filmic, but early on, I couldn’t imagine managing the costs, collaboration, and planning involved in filmmaking, so I channeled my ideas into other forms. The process has become much more accessible, so recently, I’ve been able to proceed in a more direct way. Movies have always been an inspiration, although I’m often interested in aspects of them that might be considered tangential—the procession of advertisements announcing their arrival, the movie marquees, the velvet seats, the curtains, the scale of the screen images, the light from the projector, the opening frames, the dissolve, the zoom, the cascading names at the end.

MDB
The more recent work *The Composition of Decomposition* (2018) was a very precise process. You started with an image from a newspaper, found more than ten years ago, that you kept in the back of your mind. Can you speak a bit about the genesis of the piece?

JB
Yes, it took me a really long time to determine the right setting for this image. It’s an image I clipped from the *New York Times* of a group of skeletons in a burial site from the plague years. The photograph was taken from above the grave, and the skeletons are looking up.

Jennifer Bolande emerged as an artist in the late 1970s, working in dance, choreography and drawing. In the early 1980s, she advanced the ideas and strategies proposed by the Pictures Generation Movement and began working with found images, re-photography, appropriation, film and installation, taking her place among those artists who have helped to redefine photography. She took an intuitive approach to creating conceptual works in the construction of a coherent visual language. A retrospective exhibition of her work was organized in 2010 by the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, then traveled to the ICA in Philadelphia, and the Luckman Gallery at California State University in Los Angeles. A monograph on her work was published by JRP|Ringier in conjunction with the show. Her award winning site-specific project *Visible Distance/Second Sight* was featured in the inaugural *Desert Exhibition of Art*, in 2017. An upcoming exhibition at Pio Pico Gallery, Los Angeles, titled *The Composition of Decomposition* will include a new body of works, films and sculptures.

Above - *The Composition of Decomposition* (stills), 2018. Courtesy: the artist
Opposite - *Image Tomb* (detail), 2014. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Jennifer Bolande