

# TEXTE ZUR KUNST (1)

## Nature Is Healing, We Are The Virus

By Katherine Siboni, Print, June 2021

SculptureCenter



Rindon Johnson, "For example, collect the water just to see it pool there above your head. Don't be a Fucking Hero!" 2021–ongoing

Consisting of an intricate network of streams and reservoirs, the New York City watershed provides the largest unfiltered supply of water in the United States, and city residents are known to boast about its unparalleled water quality. In his first solo museum exhibition, Berlin-based artist Rindon Johnson includes a map of this system, rendered in stained glass, as one of many symbols in the show that point to what writer and curator Katherine Siboni describes as Johnson's etymological kinship with the behavior of water. This natural resource and the laws of nature that govern it are capricious; water can trans-form and trans-port, and it serves as an apt metaphor through which this exhibition examines the nature of transition.

Rindon Johnson's *For example, collect the water just to see it pool there above your head. Don't be a Fucking Hero!* (2021–ongoing) is positioned as an elusive prelude to his current exhibition at SculptureCenter. Hovering above sightlines and preempting the threshold of the gallery space, *For example* comprises an eroded raw cowhide, made slightly translucent by its prolonged exposure to sun and rain, tightly suspended from SculptureCenter's patinaed industrial gates by several lengths of nylon rope. The work's date indicates that it will continue to corrode indefinitely, that every viewing is an excerpt of a durational piece that is perpetually being made as it communes with nature.

Inside the gallery, Johnson extends his engagement with the outdoors and liminal spaces. A pair of leaded stained-glass doors open to the gallery's courtyard, temporary surrogates for more standard egress. In the doors' design, a flecked sienna grid is tugged out of regularity by two meandering, bifurcating threads of indigo running across the composition. The sun, when shining, casts glowing patches of color from the glass onto the gallery floor, rendering the installation's appearance contingent on outdoor conditions. Like a naturally activated Dan Flavin, the work spans from a physical presence on the walls to an ephemeral one on the floors. The doors' glass and iron image in fact depicts the New York City water system, which is channeled from the Catskills upstate and through a system of rivers, lakes, aqueducts, and reservoirs called the Croton Watershed. The work is titled:

*Floating through the canyon, through the canyon, through the canyon, the Peace of Martial Law, the PEACE of Martial Law, the canyon walls are 2000 feet high, 2000 feet high, 2000 feet high, some rose-colored glasses, some rose-colored glasses, it is only a matter of time. No, this thing and not the other thing either. CREEK! It's only a matter of time. Find me inside, many of us were scared, but after they ate a pizza from the backpack of a man who was taking a swim, they were looking for dessert. They found the bag and decided to take it away (2021)*

Like *For example*, Johnson's glass doors refer to elsewhere, incorporate the elements, hug the edges of the gallery. "Law of Large Numbers: Our Bodies" includes six works in total, as well as an accompanying book by Johnson. <sup>[1]</sup> The show will travel to London's Chisenhale Gallery as "Law of Large Numbers: Our Selves," consummating the latter half of its title's reference to the groundbreaking book on women's health *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. Collectively authored and first published in 1969, the book's early editions aimed to empower women through guides to cis-female anatomy. By 2011, the book was expanded to include spectrums of gender identity and sexual orientation. The exhibition title's first half refers to the law of large numbers, a concept in business and finance dictating that an entity growing rapidly must eventually slow its pace – the larger a company's revenue, for instance, the more astronomical and therefore less sustainable a yearly growth of 50 percent is rendered. Likewise, the larger the entity, the more impact is required to effect change. Johnson's exhibition steadily links duality and vastness, the possibilities of intermediate states being far more than those of stasis.



"Rindon Johnson: Law of Large Numbers: Our Bodies," SculptureCenter, New York, 2021–ongoing, installation view

In Johnson's book, he ponders the inherent contradiction in building a monument to trans people like himself. "You cannot build a house in gender. Rather, Trans is a wave, cresting, retreating, arriving again [...]. If I set the parameter that it must be a stream and it must be a sculpture, what kind of visual proposition can I muster?" (p. 127). A native of the Bay Area, he finds its template lurking in the San Francisco skyline: the Transamerica Pyramid, built in 1972 and initially reviled, the futurist obelisk then the tallest skyscraper west of Chicago. Designed by architect William Pereira, the phallic form – designed to minimally obstruct sunlight for the pedestrians below – was denigrated as "Pereira's Prick." It has since become a beloved trademark of the city.

With *Coeval Proposition #1: Tear down so as to make flat with the Ground or The \*Trans America Building DISMANTLE EVERYTHING* (2020), Johnson has evacuated the San Francisco prototype's solidity, shrunk its scale, and supplemented its armature with an inverted twin of its form, piercing the upright version down its middle. Johnson explains bluntly in one of his sketches that the sculpture demonstrates "the Transamerica Building fucking itself" (p. 133) – a phrase implying a dynamism of gender, Pereira's Prick receiving itself, not active or passive but startlingly self-sustaining. The structure is made of California redwood that was used for New York City's water towers and is now sold in

reclaimed planks. In using this material, Johnson makes his open-air monument truly trans-American in provenance, having in some form occupied each coast. The reference, again, to New York City's complex water system, signifies flowing water, constant and ever changing.

In the late 1960s, Robert Smithson's *Nonsites* represented New Jersey's industrial townships synecdochally with the natural material collected there, presenting in geometrically contained arrangements displaced rocks and gravel alongside photography and maps of their physical origin, or Sites. Johnson, who executed "Law of Large Numbers: Our Bodies" remotely during the pandemic, employs a similar material symbolism to index distance and liquidity in *Coeval Proposition #1*.





Rindon Johnson, "Coeval Proposition #1: Tear down so as to make flat with the Ground or The \*Trans America Building DISMANTLE EVERYTHING," 2021–ongoing

Johnson's book, *The Law of Large Numbers*, constitutes what curator-at-large Sohrab Mohebbi calls an "autobiography of an exhibition." The book charts most of 2020 (its epilogue the first months of 2021) in a medley: monthly journal entries; xeroxes of sketches and annotated book pages; screenshots of news sites and YouTube videos; images of and by other artists whose influence Johnson was following, resisting, or both. Midway through the book, Johnson lingers on the false cognate of data/Dada. Handwritten notes in the margin of Saidiya Hartman's essay "Venus in Two Acts" state that both data and Dada (and Pop Art and Fluxus) "function in the space of recombinant narrative, to make an opaque, multivalent thing, whose main function is to imagine what cannot be verified" (p. 106). Both the avant-garde and the specialized mapping of information are coded, with one symbol possibly standing for many things.

Johnson narrates the process of drawing on a map, marking SculptureCenter/New York and Chisenhale/London, connecting the two with a line, and drawing an X at the midpoint. This landed Johnson in the North Atlantic "cold blob," an area of the Atlantic Ocean that is rapidly cooling as the Gulf Stream current warms the waters around it. In *Coeval Proposition #2: Last Year's Atlantic, or You look really good, you look like you pretended like nothing ever happened, or a Weakening* (2021), Johnson uses a computer animation program to generate an ongoing feed of weather conditions in the cold blob, one year ago to the second. Johnson collected weather data from March 2020 to January 2021, which he fed through a rendering program that translates the information visually. In a small, darkened gallery, a crisp projection shows an aerial view of gently cresting, foamy waters; rain

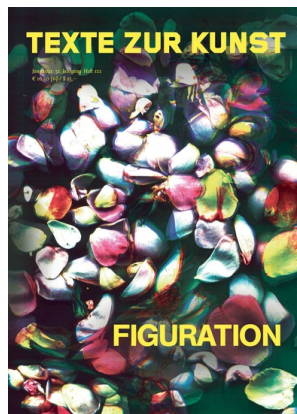
pelting an inky depth; a slowly churning layer of clouds like those one sees from a plane window. As the system runs through various representations of the same basic information, it reflects back the imprecision of the original metric, the insufficiency of man-made measurements in representing the vast complexity of nature.

“The catharsis of transition is not climbing up onto a sand bank, rather it is the breaking of a wave in the middle of the sea, capping, all inner whims, cresting, bubbles in aggregate only to be simultaneously forming again” (p. 125). Johnson’s exhibition of slippery “nonsites” integrates rain, rivers, man-made water systems, and the Atlantic Ocean; even a cowhide stretched onto an oval frame, propped outdoors and dusted with snow, is documented in the book. Johnson finds an etymological kinship with the behaviors of water, which can trans-form and trans-port, yet remain resilient in identity. Realized from afar and during a year of uncertainty and instability, “Law of Large Numbers: Our Bodies” intimately examines the nature of transition, just as it directs our attention to the scale of our experience.

“Rindon Johnson: Law of Large Numbers: Our Bodies,” SculptureCenter, New York, March 25–August 2, 2021.

## NOTE

- [1] Rindon Johnson, *The Law of Large Numbers*, exh. cat., with Sohrab Mohebbi and Ellen Greig and a foreword by Zoé Whitley and Kyle Dancewicz (New York: Inpatient Press, 2021).



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