

MOUSSE

CONVERSATIONS

Sam Anderson “The Park” at SculptureCenter, New York
Sam Anderson interviewed by Elena Tavecchia — June 2017



Sam Anderson, *E number 1 – 11*, 2017, installation view, clay, wood, wire, copper, acrylic.

ELENA TAVECCHIA: You participated in the group show at Dortmunder Kunstverein, whose title *Ichts* was a combination of the words *Ich* (I) and *nichts* (nothing). According to the curatorial vision, this newly coined word refers to a different approach in the representation of the self, related to figures without a body, or forms with a manifold identity. Do you consider this an important part of your work?

SAM ANDERSON: *Helpful Waitress Angel* (2016), the piece I made for *Ichts*, is based on a sculpture in the Poblenou cemetery in Barcelona called *The Kiss of Death*, which depicts Death holding and kissing a dying man. My version replaces Death with a waitress. Rather than providing comfort, the situation is an inconvenience to her. To the man, she is an angel. Narrative details are there, but the story isn't important. The viewer does not see Harry or Sally; they see “waitress,” “angel,” or “dying man.” One is “helpful.” In my version, there is no reciprocal relationship between the two figures besides place and time. There's no kiss. In that way they become more like placeholders for something, or fragments of an event. They are performing a recognizable but very limited action.

ET: With this variety of characters displayed, is there a narrative involved?

SA: There are traces of narratives, and I develop works from very autonomous ones, but I am mostly interested in the details. As a whole, it's like when you walk into a café or a park or a train, there is a randomness but also an order about the place and the people who inhabit it. You know they all have stories, but this is usually the furthest thing from your mind. Maybe the sculpture of the horse in the park is part of it, or something is happening in the trash. Maybe you don't care about it, or you care too much. Or you're curious and imagine something disturbing. Or someone looks like someone you know, or you feel excluded, or you don't notice anything and everything is noise. A lot of it is about perception, selective memory, and how desire organizes all of it.

ET: In the video *Endless Love* (2015) your mother plays a leading role. Do you think of her as an open character?

SA: My mother is a character actress, and because of her distinct physicality she plays the same types of roles. She's been cast as an aunt, a nun, a housekeeper, a nurse, a cop, a waitress—repeatedly. She often plays peripheral characters who exist to move the protagonist along in their story. She gives advice or makes the audience laugh. It's interesting to me how one body can have so many different lives, yet can also live out the same types of lives. In my case with my mother, it's open because she's also a trained



professional. You may recognize her or not. But you hear a quality to her voice specific to a genre of twentieth century theater, and that she uses a specific kind of sound and rhythm. Actors want to transcend, to play beyond their physical limitations. They want to be the full range of characters. So before *Endless Love* I asked my mom, “What have you never played but always wanted to play?” She said she wanted to do Eugene O’Neill’s *A Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1956), so I mixed different pieces of this play with selected other conversations I’ve overheard. A year later, when she recorded the script for me, I didn’t think she realized that parts of the text came from that play. I also like how you can hear her voice deepen with age as the contemporary recording overlaps with clips I included from this revisionist Western film she did in the late 1970s. There’s a lot of anxiety about “time” in that video.

ET: Among your upcoming projects there is a solo show at SculptureCenter at the beginning of May. What are you working on for the show?

SA: I’m making a massive composition that includes both gurative and non gurative works, while trying to make space for improvisation inside the given grid. There’s a new video I’ve been working on with birds, and there’s a large transparent waitress figure. The waiter/waitress keeps reappearing, I think for many reasons. For one, if you think of a restaurant as a grid, the waiter is the most important thing; she or he is like an electrical current that connects the kitchen to the tables. She can also move diagonally within the grid, and can determine the speed and quality of the experience. Part of the composition will contain an interpretation of a children’s chorus. I may include a work based on a drag queen I’ve been studying.

ET: What are the inspirations for your work at the moment?

SA: Recently I’ve been looking at Anthony Braxton’s compositions. My husband is a musician who played accordion for him in one of his orchestras. A few years ago we found a folder filled with copies of Braxton’s scores in our storage. The scores are very visually based, and I think they are really beautiful drawings. Braxton makes a set of rules for improvisation within a composition. For example, a score might consist of photos, shapes, names, wavy lines, et cetera. So you have traditional Western notation and time signatures, and then a specific kind of improvisation as determined within a given timeframe. Which type of logic applied to this improvisation is shaped by the event on the page; “soloing” isn’t entirely up to the instrumentalist. A lot of the titles of his works are also drawings that evoke specific moods or tones. In his writings he explains his approach in three parts: determinate, indeterminate, and synthesis. The determinate side of life is composition, the indeterminate side is improvisation, and the third is the synthesis of those two things. I’m not directly following a formula, but I like to try something similar to this idea of synthesis, using sculptures and objects. Conceptually I love this idea of building a complex grid with both preexisting and improvisational elements. I have also been thinking about the staging of operas. I like Robert Ashley’s first chapter of *Perfect Lives* (1983), where he describes the details of a park. There’s a complex narrative. But for me it’s about some of the details, a lonely feeling, and “Blue” Gene Tyranny’s music. Morton Feldman and Joan La Barbara’s *Three Voices* (1982)—I like the way it deals with boredom in a way, as the structure is always morphing and surprising you. Philip Glass’s opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1975) is interesting because the music is very heavy, and so is the subject matter, but the staging is deliberately so minimal. The whole thing is a very successful synthesis of minimalism and maximalism.

ET: Could the leather works be a possible attempt toward this synthesis? I see them as reorganized debris, things that are usually scattered, but reassembled in a rigorous way.

SA: I started making the leather works by accident. I befriended a family that runs a leather business, and they gave me a big pile of scraps. The scraps were free because they were stained, damaged, and cut into. I liked the unusual forms left over from the cuts. The skins resemble faces, animals, countries, states, or lakes, depending on the color and shape. I liked the idea that the nature of the scrap somehow dictated the content of the debris on its surface. For a long time I kept a brown piece of leather on my desk that resembled the shape of Texas. Various pieces of things collected on top over time; I think it took about five months to finish that one. But yes, I think there’s a kind of synthesis with what is a given and what I am controlling or forcing.

ET: How do you select materials in your work?

SA: I often make things with packages of salt, sticks, gifts—whatever is around, close to me, sometimes assembled very quickly, like a sketch of something that I’d at one point imagined I’d ideally like to build. I think it is important to not hide the limitedness of materials. I think it’s important to not make such an effort to secure something or to make it last, so I guess the works can be very vulnerable. I don’t want to say “it is what it is,” but the prototype of something is usually more fragile, truthful, disturbing, sad, funny, angry, better.