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Friends & Family

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

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2016

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2016

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Friends & Family

by

Tanya Valerie Brodsky

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2016

Professor Anya Gallaccio, Chair

My MFA Thesis exhibition, *Friends & Family*, presents an ongoing exploration of the capacity of everyday spaces and objects to dictate the choreography of social interaction. Informed by my childhood experiences of Soviet architecture in Ukraine, the form and materiality of the works in the exhibition reference railings, fences and public exercise equipment: utilitarian structures that presuppose a specific user and set of behaviors. These original forms stand as tangible manifestations of social conventions and modes of behavior. A handrail, for example, both facilitates and obstructs motion, channeling the flow of pedestrians into the normalizing logic of paths and stairways. In the exhibition, the original functions of these utilitarian structures are subverted through shifts in scale, placement and context. Forms are deconstructed, recreated and positioned in ways that necessitate new visual and physical

modes of navigating the exhibition space. Site lines are framed and offset with forms that bring into focus relationships between the properties of the space, its occupants and the works themselves. Re-created to new parameters, the sculptural objects acquire new associations and reveal formal properties obscured in the original by its familiarity and use, rendering them abstractions of their former selves.

Friends & Family

A Soviet joke:

You see two workmen on the side of the road. One is digging a hole in the ground, the other is filling it back in with dirt at the same pace.

Punch line: the guy whose job is to stick the post in the ground never showed up.

The urban Soviet landscape of my childhood was rife with structures planned top-down for use by, and for the betterment of, the populace. Steel rails facilitated semi-public areas for dusting rugs and drying laundry, served as exercise equipment and separated communal balconies into the private spaces of each family unit. School playgrounds combined tall hurdles and chin-up bars used by the older boys in mandatory army training with the monkey bars that we played on at recess. Railings guided the citizenry into appropriate paths and prevented their straying into forbidden zones. Everywhere, the tangible elements of the city reflected a master plan for its proper navigation and use.

Strict rules governing the alteration of state-issued property, combined with planning oversights regarding the individualized needs of the people, spawned myriad non-sanctioned uses for the structures in place. With the supposed lack of private property, these fences, railings and exercise equipment occupied a gray zone of semi-privacy: they defined the edges of spaces allotted to each family, each building, each neighborhood, but always with the understanding of being shared with those on the other side of the divide. Standardized structures, regardless of their original function, were used to hang out laundry, sun-cure fish caught in the park pond, and dry strings of wild mushrooms as well as found liquor bottles for sale to the recycler.

When I was ten, my family immigrated to the Midwest. In my memories, a notable part of this experience was a stark shift in the way that the people around me moved through, and utilized spaces. Misunderstandings arose immediately around my family's use of our apartment balcony and recreational equipment in the shared yard. The built environment itself felt confusing, unfamiliar. American structures held different intensities of control than those I was used to: the flimsy velvet rope at the bank really controlled the shape of the queue; the edges of a concrete slab delineated a neighbor's inviolable personal space. People got upset for unclear reasons. I remember being aware of not knowing the proper ways to respond to the structures

around me, trying to mimic the gestures of others.

These childhood experiences have found subtle entry points into my artistic practice. My recent work explores the capacity of everyday spaces and objects to dictate the choreography of social interaction. I am drawn to slippages in the utility of these structures. Functional failure in the familiar offers a glimpse of the intentionality of its construction, and makes apparent its sculptural properties.

My work is oftentimes positioned as a response to structures and spaces that are charged with the anticipation of change, that invite the taking-on of personae and create temporary communities. I am interested in moments where social structures and modes of behavior become tangible form. Much of my work, and this exhibition especially, exists in a space between sculpture and installation. I respond to the exhibition space as a site, whether making work for a gallery that occupies a former hotel lobby, staging an installation on a beach, in a forest, or in a collector's pool. The rituals, conventions and motions that make up the social choreography of the space are manifested in the scale and placement of the work. Site lines are framed and offset with forms that bring into focus relationships between the properties of the space, its occupants and the works themselves.

Some of the decisions regarding placement, color and orientation in this exhibition, originate from an artist book that I made several months ago. Titled *samplebook* (figure 1), it is both a study for the installation, and one half of an attempt to draw parallels between the acts of walking and reading (or, at any rate, flipping the pages of a book). *Samplebook* consists of a series of drawings, based on images of railings, grates and fixtures in architectural supply catalogs. Painted on translucent frosted Mylar, each spread of the book reveals layered compositions consisting of images on the pages before and after.

The use of color and form in *samplebook*, as well as in my sculptural works, has been greatly influenced by artists like Ellsworth Kelly, Anne Truitt, and Sol Lewitt, whose work helped to define Minimalism in the 1960's and 70's. Kelly, especially, has had a vast influence on my work through his approach to architecture and photography as a means of generating abstract compositions. My color choices draw on his and Truitt's uses of subtly different hues of vibrant color, placed next to each other to create complex relationships between adjacent forms. I am drawn, especially, to the undulations in Truitt's work between nearly imperceptible tonal variations, punctuated by sharply contrasting fluorescents. In my work, I draw on the visual rhythm that emerges from this chromatic push and pull, relying on color as an element for gen-

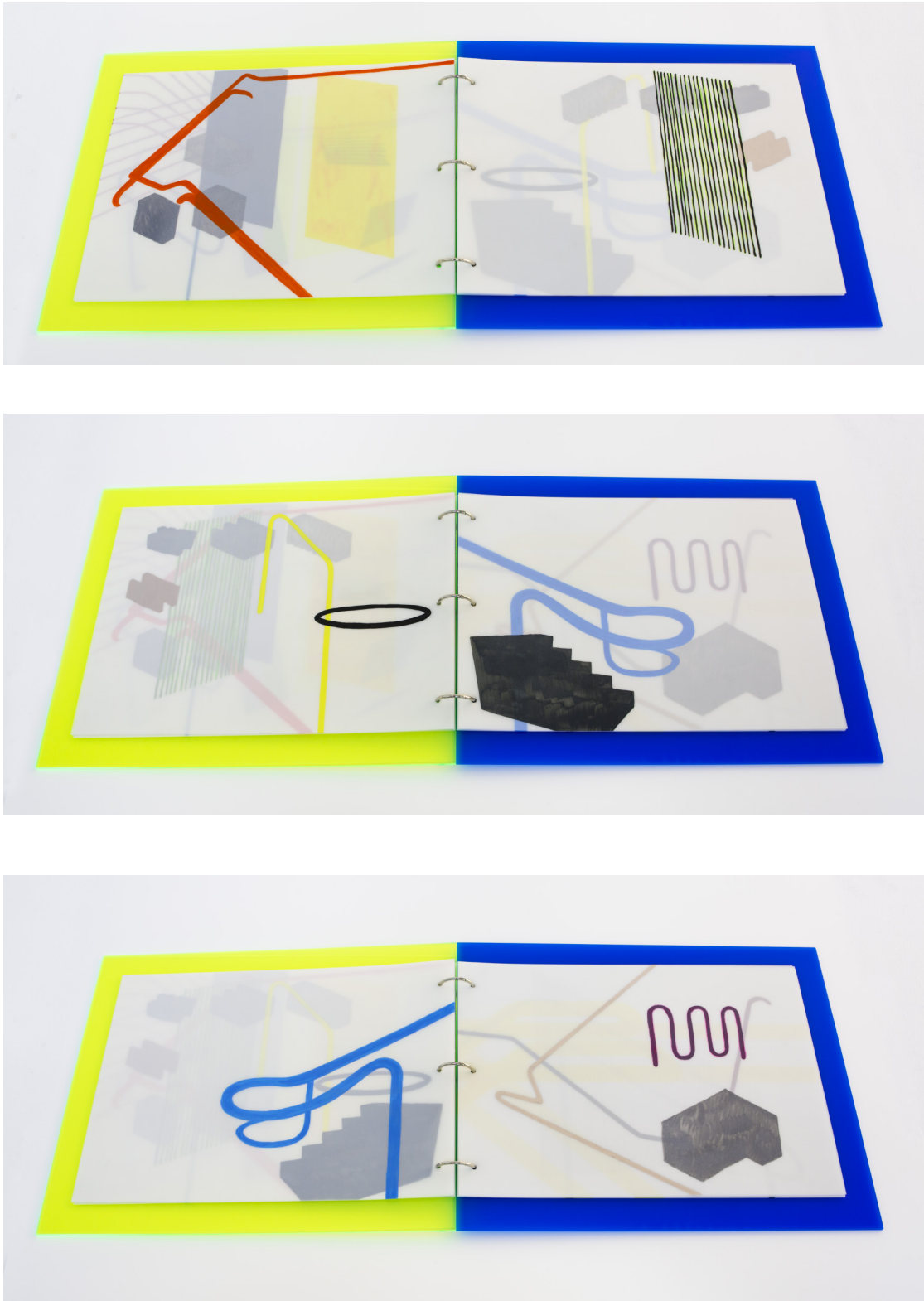


Figure 1: samplebook, acrylic and ink on frosted Mylar, 2016

erating visual, as well as physical motion. The use of industrial processes as an index for developing a palette is another tenet of the Minimalist tradition that appears in my work. The railing sculptures in the exhibition are powder-coated in colors selected from industry-standard pigments, through the same process and utilizing the same color range as the real-world structures that they reference. Color, here, functions within a logic set up by the material and form, while simultaneously serving to complicate the relationships between the works.

The act of walking through this exhibition takes on similar properties of rhythm and layering as those present in *samplebook*. Constructed out of bent steel tube, the linear forms of the sculptures exist as drawings in space, as much as three dimensional objects. Viewed from different vantage points, their lines and curves overlap and flatten perspectively to reveal new compositions. Here as in the book, the acts of looking forward and back reveal new layerings of line and form. Shifts in color between the sculptures create intensities of proximity and contrast. Shades of blue merge across the space to create new cumulative forms, slowing the visual rhythm of progression from one piece to the next. The sharper contrast of orange and burgundy creates punctuations, accelerating movement within the composition. The shadows cast by the sculptures onto the walls and floor of the gallery create ephemeral lines that are as much a part of the larger drawing created by the installation as the tangible steel forms. The delicate tensions that develop between the visual and haptic experiences of space have emerged as an important theme within both this exhibition, and my practice as a whole. I am interested in exploring the potential of light, shadow, and reflection to be treated as sculptural materials to address the idea of a line as simultaneously a mark on a surface, an object in space, and an absence of light.

In this body of work, forms that suggest one type of motion are installed within a space where an entirely different set of motions and interactions typically take place. The works in the exhibition resemble railings and other utilitarian structures, both in their form and materiality. They reflect structures meant for use by, and scaled to, the human body. Here, however, scale and positioning are altered, rendering their original function obsolete, or necessitating a change in the motions associated with their use. The variety of forms in the exhibition reference structures, whose use and history carry both a personal resonance for me, and relate to wider histories of Modernist design and Minimalist sculpture. While the works are not meant to be touched, leaned on, or swung from, the familiarity of their form and materiality in-

vites a mental reenactment of these gestures. The installation invites a negotiation of physical and visual obstacles that intervene in, and fragment the (often communal) motion through the gallery. Pass-ability and visibility conflate to heighten awareness of the embodied experience.



Figure 2: Installation view, *Friends & Family*, 2016, Main Gallery, UCSD

My work with railing forms began a little over a year ago as a proposal for a residency project at the 3rd Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art. The Biennial offered artists the opportunity to spend two months working with one of several factories in the famously industrial region of northern Russia to produce a temporary installation. My proposal, which got through to the second round, was to work with a pipe manufacturer to create a series of railings which would be installed on several of the numerous remnants of abandoned Soviet-era construction projects. The series of drawings that I created for the proposal depict brightly colored hand rails that alternately guide and inhibit the progress of users over empty concrete foundations, onto detached staircases and around pylons, generating obsolete and oftentimes absurd trajectories (figure 3). I was not accepted into the residency, but the work begun in this proposal spurred me to further investigate my relationship to, and interest in, railings and similar architectural structures and their influence on human motion.

Railings fascinate me as structures that alter motion into predetermined paths and trajectories. They are stationary objects that can only be understood in relation to motion and the human body. Railings are, more so than any other structure, an explanation in tangible form of how a space is to be navigated and by whom. Railings are part of a logical, efficient, and specifically modern system of relating to architectural space. Hand rails, banisters and safety rails presuppose a very specific user in their placement, incline, curves and diameter.

My grandfather, the Soviet architect, told me that spiral staircases in Medieval towers were designed so that the attacking soldiers (going up the stairs) would have to balance against the wall with their right hand and fight the defenders with their (weaker) left. Whether true or not, this story fascinated me (especially as a left handed child). I looked for this logic in my environment, inventing complicated narratives of the utility of spaces and structures where one wasn't readily available. The first years of my encounter with the ADA-compliant terrain of our Midwestern town presented new complications in my narrative-building. Here, the navigation of space was governed by entirely unknown principles. Rules were clearly at play, but they governed bodies that were unfamiliar to me, assisting them with confounding tasks and safeguarding them from unknown dangers.

A railing that is to be gripped for safety is made of a thinner stock to accommodate the curve of a closed hand. One that is merely meant to be leaned on, is usually thicker, both to support the weight and curvature of the entire body, and to relate to an open, rather than gripping, hand (the International Residential Code,

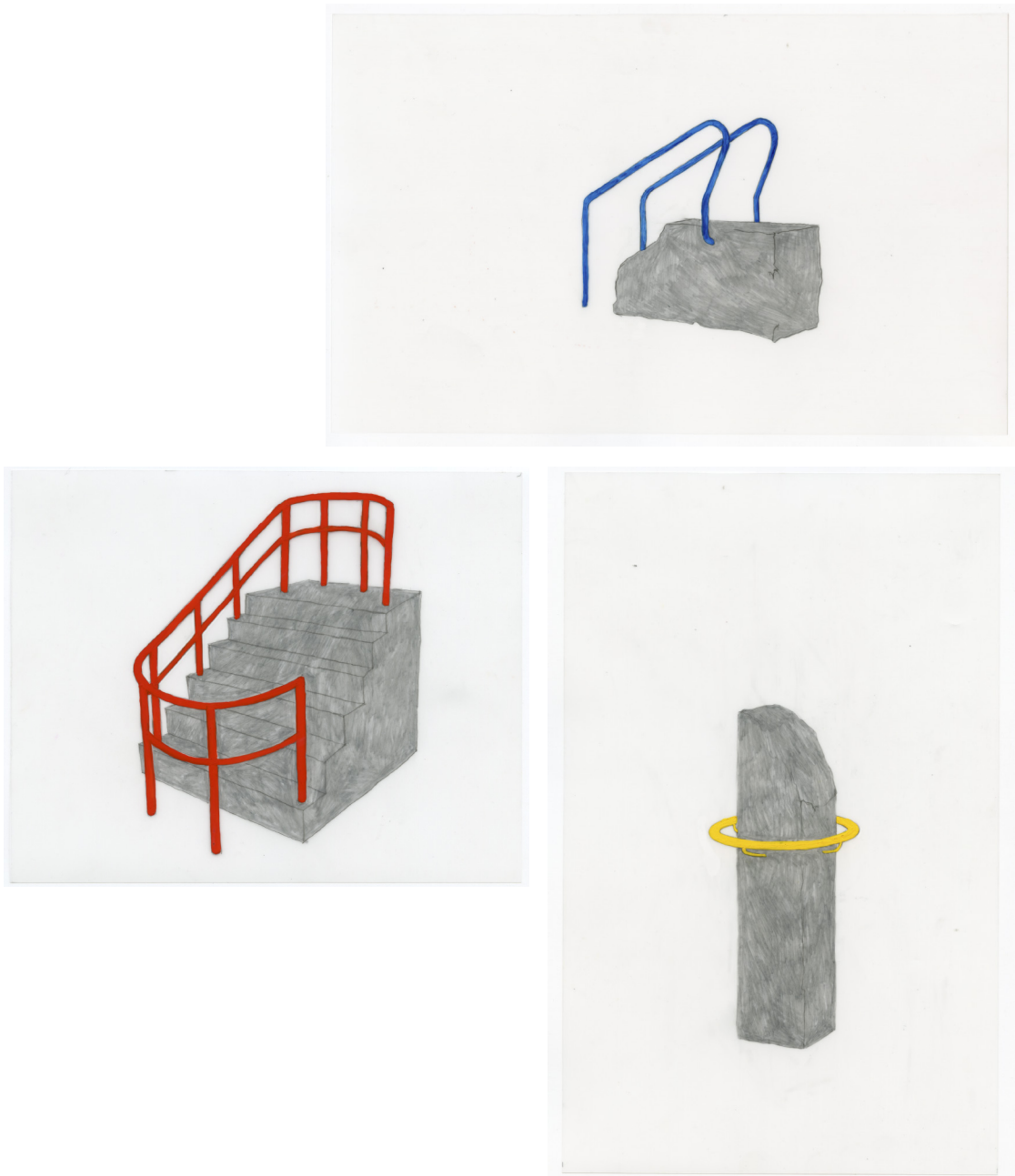


Figure 3: proposal drawings, gouache on frosted Mylar, 2015

used for handrails in the U.S., mandates specific diameters for railings, with stipulations for finger grooves for any railing thicker than 6 1/4"). The height at which a railing is positioned corresponds to a comfortable arm angle and center of gravity of some presupposed average user. Le Corbusier famously put forth the Modulor, a system for determining proportion in architecture based on the application of the Golden ratio to, what was, at the time, the average height French man. As most of us don't happen to correspond to the proportions used in these determinations, we naturally adjust our movements to accommodate the structures around us. Last summer, I spent time working in my 6'9"-tall friend's custom-built blacksmith studio, where I had to stand on a crate to use any of the machines. Inadvertently, we use our bodies to learn about the proportions of the person (real or imagined) for whom the spaces we navigate were designed.

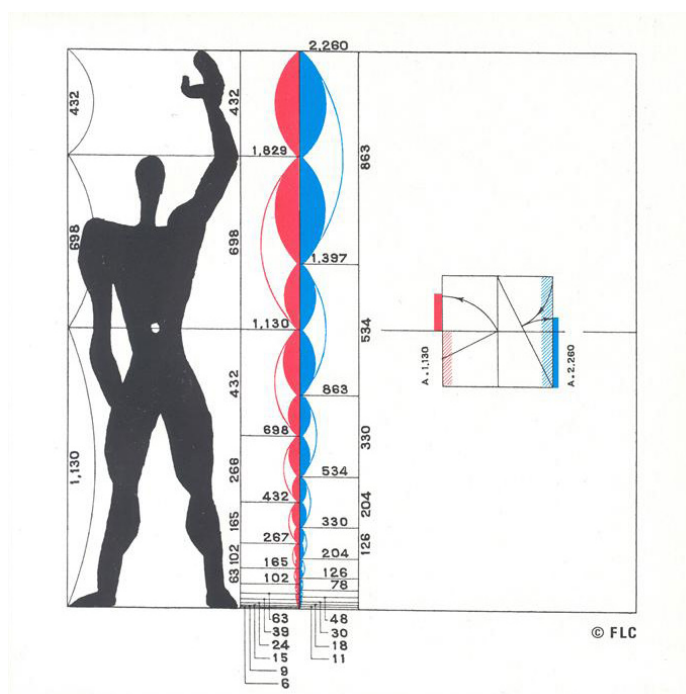


Figure 4: Le Modulor, by Le Corbusier, 1945, image courtesy Foundation Le Corbusier © FLC-ADAGP

Railings are structures meant to assist in the navigation of constructed, as well as natural, terrain. The inclines, bends and turns of the rail respond to the topography of the land. In their angles and scale they speak to the difficulty or ease of the motions associated with each instance of moving over a specific topography. They serve a didactic function in describing the space that they are designed to occupy, as well as the correct way of interacting with it. This information, contained in the

physical form of each railing, remains, regardless of whether or not it is installed in its intended environment, and whether or not that environment has since been altered.

Removed from their original site, or left unaltered with the addition of new structures, railings have the capacity to create absurd situations. A handrail can lead you into a wall, curve out of reach without its attendant stairs, make you traverse a pointless loop. The logic governing the original installation of railings can result in similarly absurd scenarios. In front of my local corner store in San Diego, for example, there is a large pillar with a handrail inexplicably winding $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way around it. To exit the building housing Park View gallery in LA, you have to always walk on the left side of the railing to avoid running into a fence. As a child in Kiev, I lived in a neighborhood full of state-funded construction projects, in various states of completion and abandonment. Architectural elements were installed (or not) at protracted intervals, governed by lapses in funding and availability of materials. Towering pre-fab walls, lacking the staircases and landings that would permit their navigation, sported brand new banisters, doors opened onto multi-story drops, turnstiles guarded empty concrete slabs. Extended work stoppages at these sites made them easy targets for citizens looking to augment their dachas. Railings meant for one type of architecture and terrain cropped up in the Ukrainian countryside, serving an entirely different function in a different landscape.



Figure 5: Polish boys hanging out by a trzepak; photograph by Artur Gintowt, 2012

Two of the works in the exhibition are based on the form of a trzepak. *Trzepak* is a Polish word referring to a structure used for suspending rugs while they are beaten with a paddle to remove dust. Consisting of a thick steel frame with a cross-bar, these were permanently installed outside of all Soviet-era apartment blocks and

officially doubled as public exercise equipment.

The trzepak served as the linchpin of social activity in the neighborhood. During the day, it was used by kids as the site of acrobatic endeavors, goal post for soccer games, framework for building forts, and safe zone for tag. The cross-bar (an element meant to hold the rug rigid), allowed for multi-level climbing and more complex acrobatics on the part of the children. In the evenings, the trzepak became a gathering spot for juvenile delinquents. Each sub-culture in the neighborhood had a turf staked out around a different trzepak: the punks on one, the skin heads on another, the chain smoking teen moms with teased hair and acid-washed mini skirts favored the one in front of my building. The trzepak could be dangled on to affect nonchalance, leaned on when intoxicated, host displays of pull-ups to impress the girls, hold jackets and purses, present nominal cover (or target) for pissing. Older and more dedicated drinkers moved in to occupy the trzepaks after the teens dispersed for the night. On my way to school at 7 am, I would sometimes encounter one of them passed out under the trzepak next to an empty bottle of cheap cologne (consumed for its high alcohol content and un-rationed sale). Authorities addressed this issue half-heartedly via a bulletin board displaying grotesque, cartoonish illustrations of the perils of alcoholism. The bulletin board was attached to a special mini wooden trzepak form, installed next to our metal one.

With the advent of vacuum cleaners and wall-to-wall carpeting in the early 1990's, trzepaks moved further away from their intended rug-beating function. Committees of the citizenry elected to not install trzepaks in new housing developments due to noise and public drunkenness complaints. With the cessation of new construction, the trzepak entered the realm of nostalgia and national symbolism. The internet is full of memes extolling the structure's role in shaping a care-free Soviet childhood as well as videos of sexy Polish girls in Lulu Lemons performing pilates routines from its bars.

The mis-use of public space, influenced by my experiences in the Soviet Union, is a theme that continues in the exhibition through the introduction of smaller works, which I refer to as *Interrupters*. These works consist of three forms: fish, socks and draped cloths or rugs. The objects are cast in translucent tinted resin and are sporadically draped or hung from the railing sculptures throughout the space. As representational objects, they posit a simultaneous multiplicity of private uses for ostensibly public structures, and speak of communal living and urban crowding.

The *Interrupters* reference elements of a specifically Soviet lifestyle: the tra-

ditional process of sun curing fish, transposed to a modern urban setting, the drying of laundry over balcony railings, rugs draped over the trzepak waiting to be dusted. The objects are personal: meant to be eaten, worn, or wrapped around the body, a connection that is extended in their flesh tone color range. They are things that, in their original form, smell, ooze, emit clouds of dust or reveal embarrassing stains. The term "airing dirty laundry" comes to mind. The objects' proximity to each other evokes the raunchier side of urban density, brings to mind a fear of contamination. The misuse of public space referenced by the *Interrupters* introduces an air of failure to the aesthetic of Modernist design present elsewhere in the exhibition. They are vestiges of my experiences at the tail end of a Modernist utopia, a time when the failure to standardize the needs of a population through standardized design was finally becoming apparent in the failings of the design itself.



Figure 6: *Interrupters*, detail view, *Friends & Family*, 2016

As a child, I was struck by a scene in *Old Khottabych*, a 1956 Soviet children's film about a bumbling old-world genie accidentally summoned by a modern schoolboy. In it, the boy asks Khottabych the genie to make him a phone so that he

can call his parents. The genie, eager to please, conjures a pay-phone made out of gold, which of course doesn't work because its insides are a solid block of metal. Khottabych's mistake is photographic: he created a visual replica of an object (in this instance a proto-smartobject) in a material that renders its function obsolete. The golden pay-phone is a three-dimensional image, displaying only the visual and tactile properties of the original, without the ability to recreate its function. In the same sense, the *Interrupters* recreate objects that have a functional materiality (the edible flesh of the smoked fish, the pliability that allows socks to be worn) in a non-functional material. Like Khottabych's gold, the plastic resin of the *Interrupters* carries a photographic materiality that translates the original object into its current representation through transference of touch. It is used here to present a record of an object, rather than to recreate the object itself.

The plastic of the *Interrupters* is a material simultaneously valued and valueless. When first introduced into common use, plastic was seen as a Utopian material, touted as solving problems of abundance through mass production. The very unnaturalness of plastic once gave it cache as the material of factory-produced objects rather than the traditional wood, ceramic and glass ones made at home or in local shops. In the Eastern Block, plastic remained the material of exotically Modern dinnerware and in-demand appliances well into the eighties. Plastic bottles, disposable cutlery and cheap baubles that made their way into the country from the West were treated as exotic treasures. My grandparents had a bottle of Pepsi proudly on display in their china cabinet; plastic shopping bags were carefully cared for so that they would look new through as many uses as possible. The constant new-ness of plastic objects, (as a result of their dispose-ability) cloaked them in an air of abundance. I am interested in the materiality of the *interrupter* objects as a point of access into this history of commercial dispose-ability and desire.

As sculptural objects, the *Interrupters* serve as a counterpoint to the material and formal logic of Minimalism embodied by the railing sculptures. Where the railing sculptures at times reference Donald Judd or even Carl Andre in their relationship to material and structure, the plastic of the *Interrupters* speaks a language of cheap souvenirs. As objects of a lower, quotidian order, their presence punctures the seriousness that this art historical referent brings with it. They are representational in a way that the other works are not: their presence in the space does not perform, their materiality is used more for its image-making rather than experiential properties, their color scheme is mixed by hand rather than selected from available options of

industrial coatings. They are feminine objects, both in their domestic origins, smaller scale and delicate materiality, in contrast with the steel and concrete of the railings. The presence of the *Interrupters* brings a criticality to my own relationship with the primarily male-dominated history of Minimalism.