Jesse Stecklow's Recursive Aesthetics

A catalogue essay written by curator Alex Bacon on the occasion of Stecklow's solo exhibition at mumok, Vienna.

Installation View: *Terminal*, Museum Moderner Kunst (mumok), Vienna

Jesse Stecklow's practice evolves in a recursive and aggregative fashion. Within mathematics and logic, a recursive approach is one where a problem is broken down into identical sets and a similar approach is repeated multiple times. This is an important aspect of how Stecklow approaches his work, doggedly posing the same few questions to generate new bodies of work that build on, and refer to, one another and what has come before. As the artist reflects on the ideas and implications of one body of work this inevitably suggests another, which, with time, gives rise to yet another, and so on. Forward movement, in the sense of developing a new series, say, requires Stecklow to constantly retrace his steps, re-examining what he has done in the past in order to approach new problems and contexts.

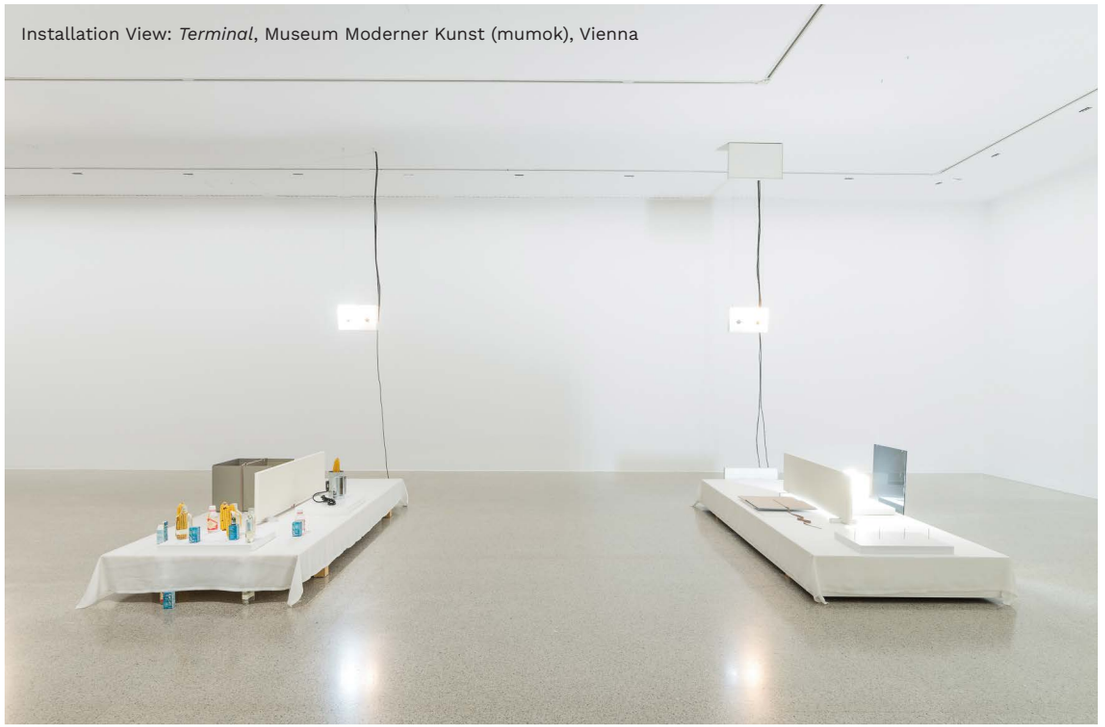
To consider Stecklow's methods is not simply to ponder the machinations of the artist's mind and studio practice. In his exhibitions Stecklow often positions past work alongside new work that refers back to it. For example, for a group show in Vienna in 2019 Stecklow went back to a work from 2014, considering the preponderance of corn-derived particles in the data sets produced by his ongoing series of air sampler works he has been making since 2014. He wanted to think through how to return to this, now central, piece of information, but—given that it originated from an American context, where corn is heavily subsidized by the government—translate it for an Austrian audience. The result was a new work that visualized that data set using corn-based products available locally, actual examples of which were placed atop a print out of that data.

Stecklow describes his approach by saying that "in crafting works that respond to each other, my practice develops as, or in, a network of relationships."[1] In the 1960s minimalist artists like Dan Flavin sought to supplant the notion of teleological development by introducing limited sets of parameters into their practices, be they materials or systems by which to generate compositions. In Flavin's case this was the unaltered commercial fluorescent light tube, the goal being to withdraw their own subjectivity as much as possible as the driving force behind the shape taken by their art. For Stecklow's generation, however, understanding the impossibility of ever fully withdrawing traces of authorship from the production, the issue is more how to recontextualize the situations in which the art and artist find themselves. For this reason, while also having developed a particular way of working and recognizable bodies of work, Stecklow focuses more on how the materials, content, and forms of presentation he uses are already connected through particular networks, whether ecological—as in the air sampler works—or institutional—as in photographs of the floors of the exhibition space or his apartment, a recent project for the Princeton University Art Museum.

Stecklow has expressed why he is drawn to this approach by saying,

“I’m interested in how my works can function as characters that take on varying roles as they move into new projects and contexts.”[2] This allows for a consciously theatrical approach, which the artist fully embraces. Art historian and critic Michael Fried famously identified theatricality as the lens for our experience of minimalist objects by artists like Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, and Robert Morris because of how they emptied out other forms of content and subject matter, leaving us with the work as a performer on the stage of the exhibition space. This means that the artwork effectively requires the viewer as perceiver, interpolating them as part of the work’s aesthetic activity, as part of its meaning. For Fried this experience of navigating space occupied by such mute object-like works, was a mundane, everyday occurrence, as opposed to the transcendent one proposed by the modernist artwork, which transported the viewer elsewhere through the vehicle of color and form.[3]

Like many artists since the 1967 publication of Fried’s seminal essay on the topic, “Art and Objecthood,” rather than be turned off from a theatrical dimension of his work Stecklow has actively embraced it. He does not want to be disconnected from the viewer, and instead sees the world as inevitably already networked. Neither the artwork nor the space in which it is exhibited is neutral, it is already a certain type of “stage.” Thus, to foreground the network is in some sense to address the situation in which we find ourselves today. Theatricality for Stecklow is not simply the realm of the stage itself, which he does directly reference in certain works, but rather the condition of the perceiving body that Fried analyzed and which led him, in the face of minimalist work, to develop the term for a visual art context. What Stecklow recognizes about the twenty-first century is that it is not only objects that have the potential to capture attention through a sense of being embodied but also images, precisely because in this moment there is something of a parity between images and objects with regard to their ontological functioning within the current economy of meaning and experience. In a time in which images are able to enact real-world events with the tap of an icon, we must see that in some sense the former primacy of the object has been diluted, just as the symbolic weight of the image has been heightened. For this reason, Stecklow’s work often weaves together different levels and regimes of meaning-making, from those inherent in raw materials to those produced by certain images to the



Installation View: *Terminal*, Museum Moderner Kunst (mumok), Vienna

evocative quality of text, which Stecklow deploys in his playful anagrams.

It is useful, therefore, to proceed in a chronological fashion through Stecklow’s works and exhibitions, where he makes his thinking evident, allowing us a viewpoint through which to track its evolving and interpenetrating logics. It is necessary, even, to establish an inventory of sorts, charting the presence and shifting usage of particular works, leaving the specific experience of them in a particular space and context up to the interpretation of the viewer. This would be anachronistic for many artists working today, and as such reveals how an apparently “old-fashioned” way of working, which is to say one with seemingly teleological implications, can be readjusted with changing circumstances and contexts. If teleology is impossible to imagine right now, when the “end of history,” and consequently the end of linear progression, is taken for granted, then a sequential way of working ceases to serve as a cipher for a regressive view of development and rather reads as a symptom of our networked

condition.[4]

An early work by Stecklow demonstrates his interest in the contingencies of the environment as well as the subtle line of humor that often threads through his practice. In this work Stecklow applied toothpaste to canvas. It is a humorous send-up of both the macho posturing of gestural abstract painting and conceptual, site-responsive art, such as Hans Haacke's condensation cubes in its use of a malleable material that reacts to the conditions in which it is placed. This work already suggests that Stecklow avoids a purist approach. By distancing himself from the austere investigations of the 1960s and '70s generation, Stecklow does not present his systems as an abstraction as, for example, Haacke does when he isolates the microenvironment of a Plexiglas cube. Instead, Stecklow's individual works are as aggregative as his project as a whole. For him surfaces are not simply planes in space but potential sites for images and the multiple potential meanings they deliver.

However, these early paintings are something of an anomaly. Much of his early work emerged from a photographic approach. In line with the tradition of its use within conceptual art, photography was, and continues to be, a tool for Stecklow rather than an explicitly aestheticized practice. This use of photography within conceptual art in the 1960s and '70s was driven by the proliferation of the cheap handheld camera, which brought the ability to casually take photos to a mass public for the first time.[5] Stecklow works in the context of this condition pushed to a degree of even higher ubiquity, in which the quality of the smartphone camera rivals the most advanced cameras from even recent times and has given rise to a constantly moving image culture fixated around identity. Appropriately, Stecklow quickly adopted a self-referential approach by which the imagery in his work referenced the larger systems addressed by his art—for example, by making wall works that included images of the data sets produced by his air samplers as well as of the devices themselves, such as those exhibited in 2014 at Retrospective Gallery in Hudson, New York. In this sense, we might say that the lens of photography was the first system through which Stecklow processed his existing works. Over time he has established primary bodies of work that he continues to explore, expand, and return to: air samplers, box sets, text works.

Jesse Stecklow, *Untitled (Air Sampler)*, 2019

The air samplers highlight another important element of Stecklow's work: the kinetic. Actual and potential movements comprise a significant segment of Stecklow's output. In that early solo exhibition, *Trios*, at Retrospective Gallery, Stecklow included air sampler works as well as sculptures involving sound. There were two types of air samplers: one in which the artist fitted clocks with sampler devices, effectively preventing them from performing their conventional time telling function, the other involving glass tubes, another, more manual type of air sampler, where one has to break its ends off to use. All the works were hung low because particles in the air tend to be suspended close to the ground, thus this positioning emphasized the works' atypical functionality as devices taking stock of the environment in which they were placed.

The next solo exhibition, *Potential Derivatives*, at M+B Los Angeles, established a relationship between the works on view via a through line of sound, whereby Stecklow recorded sounds of other works in the show, as well as past works—this suggesting that essential link, in his work, between

the work that informs it by coming before and the specific presentation at hand, which functions as an installation of sorts. The exhibition also introduced a text work that tells a story, applied as a running frieze using vinyl lettering, activating both the gallery's exhibition space and some of its back rooms, which are typically closed to the public.

The following project, at Loyal in Stockholm, emphasized the theatrical. In the presentation, a model of a bus stop was placed on a rotating disc, referencing Giles Cadle's set design for the two-part theatrical dramatization of *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman at the National Theatre in London, which Stecklow saw as a child, and which included a rotating stage. The kinetic element appeared again here, with the rotation coordinated to coincide with the time in Los Angeles, making complete rotations in twelve-hour intervals, at which point the bus stop would be facing its power source, marking either midday or midnight in LA. The idea of clock time as a human regulation of the natural order is one that has inflected Stecklow's work, beginning in 2014 with the aforementioned use of actual clocks, but with their time-telling function redacted.

Installation view: *Two Clocks*, LOYAL, Stockholm

In speaking of his recurring interest in bus shelters, Stecklow has touched upon their role of providing "temporary refuge and transient comfort," creating "enclosure while maintaining [. . .] transparency and permanence." He goes on to link them to the theatrical, speaking of them as a "sort of spontaneous theater, hosting interchanges between characters whose exterior timelines are fictions, extending outwards from this circulatory meeting point."[6]

This notion achieved a central placement in his 2016 exhibition at Chapter in New York, where an ear wiggler piece was set to a timer. A prime example of the accumulative aspect of Stecklow's practice, the ear wiggler works emerged from the data produced by his air samplers. These detected a high degree of ethanol and corn-based compounds in the air, likely a result of the US government's heavy subsidization of corn and its consequent presence in everything from gasoline to cleaning supplies. As sometimes happens for Stecklow, the term "an ear of corn" prompted further associations. It suggested a childhood drawing Stecklow made of his grandfather Henry Krinsky's ears, which the latter was able to wiggle. By placing ears of corn into tubes emblazoned with the drawings and motorizing them, Stecklow made them "wiggle" on a set timer, injecting an element of humor, which, while not entirely absent from his other work, is perhaps most evident here and is a nod to the humor which his grandfather, who was also an artist, imbued in his work. At the Chapter exhibition, the ear wiggler was synced with a sound piece. The two alternated so that the whirring of the ear wiggler occurred when the sound piece was silent, and vice versa.

Such wordplay brings up the anagrams, which are a particular extension of Stecklow's interest in language. An anagram is a word or phrase formed by rearranging the letters of a different word or phrase. Enjoying the inventive wordplay involved in this form, Stecklow uses an automated anagram generator to select anagrams that riff on certain of his concerns, such as corn. This is another way of bringing the environment into the work that Stecklow has sustained since. Such an environmental address is present in a more proximate way in the presentation of collaged panels containing pieces of fly tape, which is another material that has regularly surfaced in Stecklow's work and whose stickiness causes the work in which it appears

to absorb ambient elements of its environment.

In this presentation metronomes kept time, suggesting a rhythmic element to the act of reading the story from panel to panel, which itself became cyclical as the fragmentary nature of each segment of text caused the viewer/reader to be continually passed on to the next work ad infinitum. Following this exhibition, text and fly tape became merged in a series of panels that told a story his grandfather had been fond of recounting about the circular action of catching and releasing squirrels that happened to make it into his garden.

Out of this a body of air samplers emerged, which shed the aggregative documentation that had accrued to their surfaces in prior iterations, taking on a mirror-polished steel finish that instead brought the site of the exhibition into them by incorporating reflections of the space as their visual content, underscoring the larger conceit of these works as registering the typically invisible components of the air around the work. This was perhaps most evident in the one shown at the Chicken Coop in Portland, Oregon, which was, as the name of the space suggests, staged in a functional chicken coop. The primary audience were chickens, who had to put up with this mysterious presence in their straw covered environs.

These works have two settings, one where they are fully upright and functional as samplers, and another where the top is unfolded and the sampler removed, in which case the work becomes passive and, in losing its functional element, more a sculptural work of art, its open top suggesting that it is both functionally at rest and also giving more visual interest to the viewer, suggesting the potential of future and past use.[7]

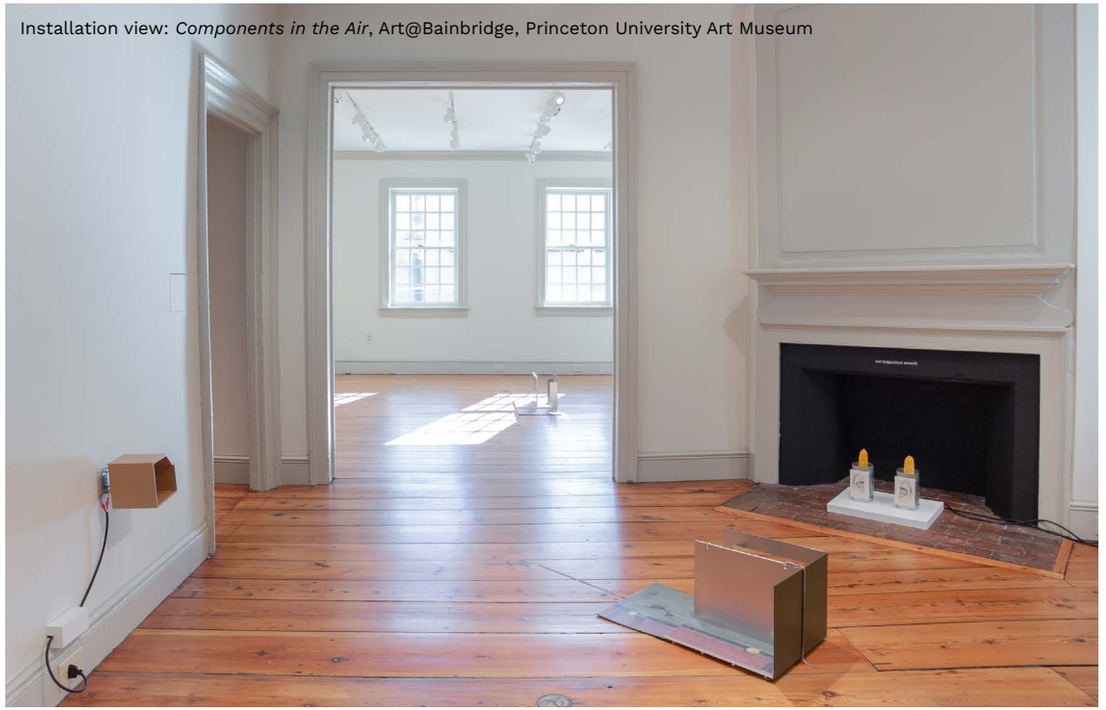
The box sets emerged from this type of work and managed to spatialize the concern with layering, assembling, and juxtaposing different types of data. The artist has described them as “hybrids—between books, boxes, and stage models.”[8] This multiple, liminal status is born out in objects that have different display possibilities and convey a sense of being mobile and changeable with their flaps, which are variously positioned as open and closed and finished with string or ribbon, suggesting the action of opening or closing. To further underscore this mutability, Stecklow often exhibits multiple box sets together, set up in different configurations.

In 2018 Stecklow presented his most ambitious exhibition yet: *Staging Grounds* at M+B in Los Angeles. For the first time the artist consciously included selections of all his different bodies of work to date. These were installed in aluminum structures that established a division between front and backstage, again taking the theatrical as an organizing principle. The idea of doubling was also extended in the duplication of pieces into different sections of the exhibition, inviting us to consider how the same work changes when its context does. Some of the changing context was also achieved with an alternation of warm and cool lighting, which shifted through the course of the exhibition.

Installation view: *Staging Grounds*, M+B, Los Angeles

The idea of doubling was the primary organizing principle of his next exhibition, at Sweetwater in Berlin. There, memory was enacted as the main component of changing context as, since both works of a given series were not viewable at the same time, the viewer was required to compare them in their mind, rather than materially creating a double show that is

constantly oscillating between what one sees before them and what is held in the mind from past experience. A related abstraction occurs when the viewer encounters the ear collector work, which scans the ear of whoever goes up to it, a process that cannot be witnessed and is only known to occur in the mind—thus creating another database of information for the artist to potentially mine in the future.



Installation view: *Components in the Air*, Art@Bainbridge, Princeton University Art Museum

Abstraction of a different sort emerged for Stecklow's next solo exhibition, *Components in the Air*, at Art@Bainbridge, a gallery project of the Princeton University Art Museum that I programmed in 2019 and 2020, with Stecklow's exhibition eventually opening in late 2021. Prevented from traveling to the site by the Covid-19 pandemic, the artist worked remotely, dealing with the space as itself an abstraction that he only experienced virtually through images and videos. Stecklow envisioned the project as a continuation of the doubling explored in the preceding Sweetwater exhibition. This time using the unique quality of the space as an eighteenth-century home divided into four domestically scaled rooms to punctuate the doubling with an introduction and a surprising conclusion. The viewer was greeted by a solitary polished aluminum air sampler. This introduced the viewer to the framing conceits of data collection and the environment which was presented through the aspect of the sampling device as well as that of the work's reflective surface, which brought the gallery space, and the viewer, into the surface of the sculpture. The air sampler was in turn framed by the first instance of the airborne element and corn-themed anagram sequence that carried across the four galleries. Its placement on the fireplace in each room, except for the first one, was another example of theatrical staging, appearing like the subtitles in an opera. This set the viewer up for the doubling, which happened across the next two galleries, where the anagrams were joined by box sets and ear wigglers.

Having traced the path Stecklow's work has taken since 2014 via the lens provided by his public exhibitions, we can turn to the next phase of his exploration of his central concerns, represented by the exhibition at mumok, which at the time of writing is in the future, though this will be published after it has been installed. To prognosticate about what will happen might be risky, but, in a world where so much of art production is outsourced and so too is the viewing experience, with many more people experiencing exhibitions virtually than in person, it makes sense to contemplate the plan for a work before it is installed.

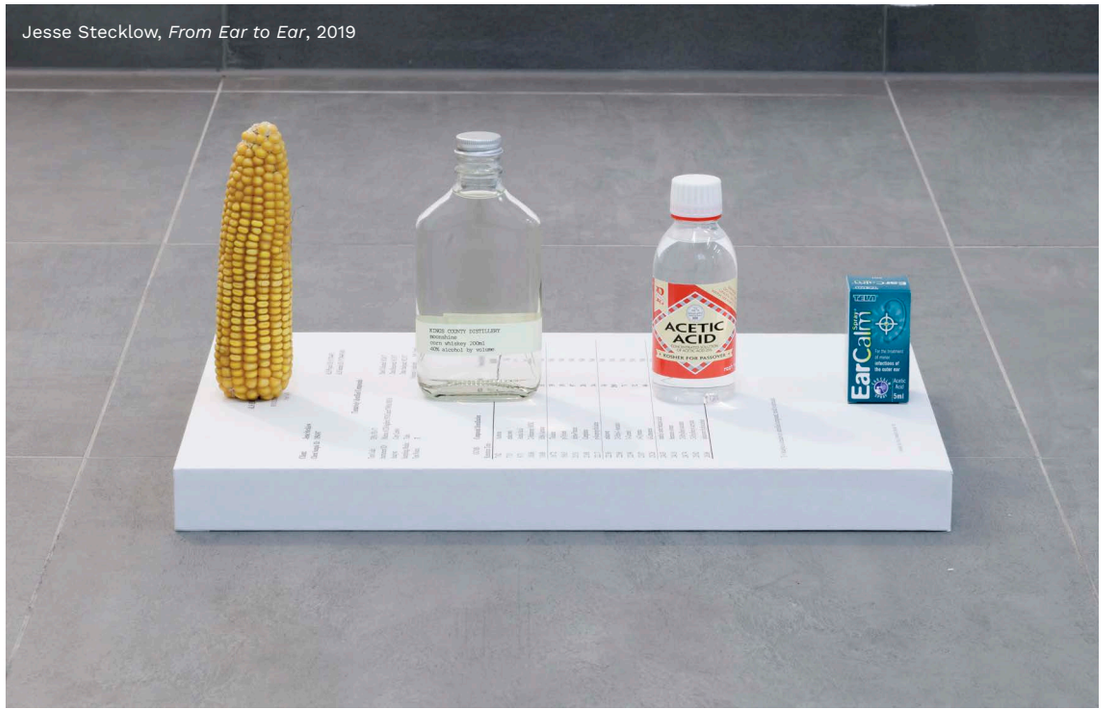
To continue, then, with an analysis of Stecklow's plans for his mumok show, as of late 2021: Recently the artist has had the opportunity to work with architecturally specific spaces. For Princeton it was the context of the eighteenth-century colonial-era Bainbridge House. The chicken coop was similarly activated by the presence of the reflective surface of his air sampler, a device that was reprised in the entrance of the Princeton show. At mumok, Stecklow's show is in a completely enclosed white cube space that lacks windows. He decided to activate it in line with another type of supposedly neutral, but actually highly specific and charged, space—that of the airport terminal. This is a site of the circulation of bodies through borders and geographical space, with all the regulations, fears, and aspirations it suggests. It is not that he does this literally, but the placement and positioning of the works draw upon the ideas of institutional neutrality that shape the visual and structural form of the airport terminal.

This is an efficiency predicated upon both securing the bodies within it from the perceived potential of violence (in an age of widespread terrorism) but also making them maximally visible and subject to surveillance and control in an era of heightened concerns around issues like immigration.

Further, while the idea predated Covid-19, the pandemic gave it a new resonance. As travel restrictions mounted, these formerly busy flows of people were stymied and the space of the airport was emptied out. At the same time the dining-room table was given new resonances as it was repurposed for other uses, as a workspace or classroom, for example, as these sites moved into the domestic sphere. This has led Stecklow to create hybrids of airport conveyor belts and dining tables, bringing two formerly disparate objects into a conversation made possible by their changing contexts due to the pandemic.

Stecklow does not pick up on one or another of these particular political concerns but rather directs us to consider the implications of any space predicated around modules and open versus closed space. To achieve this Stecklow has organized the exhibition space around platforms on and around which the individual works will be placed. It is a familiar approach, and he has again selected different examples from his, by now standardized, series. Here we find box sets, ear wiggler, air sampler, metronome light, and data base works. This is the same grouping as at Bainbridge House, with the addition of the data-set works that Stecklow introduced in a group show at VIN VIN in Vienna in 2019. For these works the artist wanted to expand on the interest he has had since at least 2014 in the data produced by his air-sampler works. At that time he UV-printed some of the data reports onto metal panels. Then, for the VIN VIN show, he took it a step further by introducing commercial versions of some of the elements that turn up in the data sets. Stecklow addressed the European context by using a European ear drop that uses the acetic acid derived from corn that comes up in the data. It was a way, with potential relevance for this exhibition, that Stecklow wanted to expand the conversation around the data's implications to a European audience, since the prevalence of corn products has such a particular context in America.

Contextually activated sound works are another new element in the



Jesse Stecklow, *From Ear to Ear*, 2019

exhibition. These will suggest the kinds of sensors that are prevalent within spaces of control like airports, such as metal detectors, and the sound emitted by the stanchions is appropriately metallic. This angle is also brought to mind by the ear collector, which is the work of Stecklow's that is perhaps most directly evocative of devices of control and surveillance. However, that familiar element of humor surfaces here, as such a record, while potentially an identifying feature, is far from the most efficient way to categorize bodies. The element first appeared in Stecklow's work in an exhibition at the Bunker, an alternative space on the outskirts of Los Angeles, and more recently have been incorporated into the exterior architecture of the Kunstverein Braunschweig. The idea was that it would anthropomorphize the space (despite being a part of whale, rather than human, anatomy) and give it a sense of being able to hear, which is another form of the space becoming activated and being envisioned to take on a role of recording and reacting to its contents. His clock works will also make an appearance, suggesting the time-keeping devices that can be one of the few ways to track time in a nonspace like an airport. However,

in frustrating their primary function by being stopped and otherwise perverted from their intended time-telling use, they point us to other ways in which our bodies are regulated through the compartmentalizing aspects of time and their usage within capitalist systems to encourage productivity.

Also in reference to an airport space, the box sets will appear as valises, their contents then defying an easy read as suitcase contents, implying the movement of goods and bodies through international systems of exchange typified by a space like the airport. Marc Augé has referred to the airport concourse as a "non-place," meaning that typical relations, history, and identity are erased, giving rise to something we experience and consequently remember only partially.[9] The introduction of sound into this kind of space suggests pioneering sound artist Max Neuhaus, whose best known work, *Times Square* (1977), is installed on a pedestrian island (now a plaza) in New York's busy Times Square. A low hum is emitted from a grate on the island and is purposely nonspecific, with the artist wanting the possibility for it to be misunderstood by the casual passerby and only discovered serendipitously. Like Neuhaus, Stecklow wants his work to quietly insert itself within existing networks and systems of meaning, subtly probing and opening them up, more so for the viewer to do the heavy labor, rather than to have the works themselves attempt to do the intellectual work for them.

1 Jesse Stecklow, exhibition brochure for *Components in the Air*. Nov. 6, 2021–Jan. 2, 2022 (Princeton, NJ: Art@Bainbridge, Princeton University Art Museum 2021), 4.

2 Stecklow, preliminary notes for mumok exhibition, September, 2021.

3 See Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," Artforum (summer 1967), reprinted in Fried, Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 148–172.

4 This influential term was already suggested in 1992, in Francis Fukuyama's now classic study, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1992).

5 See Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," in: Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, eds., Reconsidering the Object of Art, 1965–1975 (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art 1995), 247–267.

6 Stecklow, press release for *Staging Grounds*. Apr. 7–May 12, 2018, M+B Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.

7 In the most recent installation, as of this writing, at Kunstverein Braunschweig, the air sampler takes on a third setting, where it is divided by the architecture.

8 Stecklow, exhibition brochure for *Components in the Air* (see note 1), 5.

9 Marc Augé, *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995)