

## *Ear to Ear to Ear to Ear*

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

Jesse Stecklow, *Untitled*, 2022



“how arid it is / how fertile it is,”<sup>1</sup> reads the caption of a photograph taken by Man Ray in 1920 and published in the surrealist magazine *Littérature* two years later. The photograph, titled *Dust Breeding*, depicts Marcel Duchamp's famous artwork *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915–23) after a year of lying around on the artist's studio floor in New York, collecting, as to be expected, a fair amount of dust. A thin layer coats the glass, which Ray photographed from above; toward the left side of the image, large accumulations of fluff, also known as dust bunnies, and

thick felty wads are strewn across the sculpture's surface. The author in *Littérature* described the image as a view from an airplane onto a cloud/covered landscape—perhaps of farmland as seen in the Midwest of the United States, a place in which, one might assume, aridity and fertility are both metaphorical and environmental conditions.

Whether in the artist's studio or across the Great Plains of the United States, in our noses or on the moon, dust might be one of our most common denominators. Deceivably invisible except when hit by light, it migrates, settles, clogs, and is easily stirred up by a shoe or a furious feather plume. Dust collects over time, not just in quantity but also in material diversity, becoming, as Martha Stewart says, a “mirror of our lives.” It consists of everything we could possibly imagine—from particles of skin to particles from outer space—and thus describes not only our material reality but time itself. Dust traces back to the Big Bang and is an archive of everything that is and was. Mirroring the entire cosmos, it drastically exceeds our individual lives.

Jesse Stecklow's exhibition *Terminal* creates its own cosmology that reflects on notions of time, space, materiality, circulation, and transformation. Many elements, such as the air samplers, ear wigglers, box sets, light metronomes, sound boxes, and fossilized whale eardrums already exist as discrete works of art but are here reconfigured and recombined, becoming a part of an ever-evolving set. It's not quite clear if each work was ever to be shown on its own, or if the exhibition, more like a Gesamtkunstwerk, is one large audio-visual installation. Lights go on and off, and intermittent ticking fills the space. The air, however invisible at first glance, is thick with material and meaning. There is a sense of desertion, like an airport at night, but also of uncanny anticipation—imagine the residual buzz of impatient bodies seeking their connecting flights or waiting for luggage before they run out to their loved ones. Like the dust in Man Ray's photograph, *Terminal* can be viewed as a temporary accumulation of disparate particles across a landscape in which we as viewers are briefly embedded before we carry on with our ever so busy lives. Is this space arid or fertile? Only time will tell.

A terminal is a transitory space that signifies arrival and departure,

depending on where your journey is headed, For Stecklow, an exhibition is exactly that: a temporary lodge for objects until they can move to the next site. Evolution is constantly on the horizon. When an illness is terminal, a different type of destination is implied, but as we know, death is also part of life's cycle. These notions of circulation lay the conceptual foundations for Stecklow's configurations, which become visible through the repetition and reconfiguration of materials and motifs, and in his use of language.

Terminal begins in the hallway before the viewer enters the windowless gallery with a small kinetic sculpture that juxtaposes the door. As the wall-mounted object rotates, a small ball falls and hits each side in timed cycles—toc, toc, toc, toc echoes rhythmically in the entry. What the viewer does not yet know is that this box is modeled after the exhibition space so that the orientation of the walls generates the sound that emanates from its miniature. Standing in front of the box the viewer is able to look into its interior, gaining oversight of what is to come. But then again, more like an eardrum, we are also afforded an understanding of space through sound.



Jesse Stecklow, *Room Box*, 2022

Once inside, a shift of perspective takes place. Going from the bird's-eye view of the model (I think again of Man Ray's photograph) to a horizonless human scale (more like standing in front of Duchamp's upright sculpture), the viewer is confronted with a tabletop hanging from the ceiling that prompts a decision to turn left or right. On either side of the table, two fossilized inner ear bones of a whale—millions of years old—stick out and anthropomorphize this cold surface, mimicking the position of human ears. Four more tables, or sculptures, which the artist calls carousels, stand freely in the dimly lit space, where they function as support structures for a selection of smaller works: Each carousel features a box set, an ear wiggler, an air sampler, a sound stanchion, and a database. In addition, a light metronome hangs above every carousel alternating between a warm and a cold light.

Different manifestations of ears make an appearance in the exhibition and more generally in Stecklow's art practice: ears of corn, human ears drawn on paper as well as scans of viewers' ears that get sent to the artist's ear scan database, from which he culls ear models for new works, are prominent examples. Stecklow's fascination with ears stems from his childhood; the first ear he drew was his grandfather's while visiting him in the hospital before he passed. His grandfather, who was also an artist, could wiggle his ears—something only ten to twenty percent of the population can do and is considered a vestigial feature, meaning it's a trait that was useful in ancestral creatures but is now functionless. Like ear wiggling, fossilized whale eardrums no longer serve a purpose, and their existence in the exhibition is at once absurd and strangely romantic. However, they nod to the ear as a resonant body that filters soundwaves from the air to our brains and helps us balance and orient ourselves. For whales, the translation of vibrations from jaw to eardrum helps guide their migrations around the earth.

*Ear Wiggler (LEFT and RIGHT)*, from 2015, is a kinetic sculpture made up of two upright aluminum cylinders placed on modified shoe box lids, six inches apart. In each cylinder a dried ear of yellow corn sits on a mechanism from a fan duct hidden at the bottom. A small drawing of an oversized ear based on his grandfather's large lobes is mounted on the front of the individual contraptions. Both ear wigglers are connected

to electricity and controlled by a timer so that they spin every four and a half minutes for thirty seconds, creating a machine-like, assembly-line sound. Although they share the same spelling, these ears have different etymological roots; still, language sutures them together. The connection emerged in 2014 through the evaluation of an air sample Stecklow made that revealed an increased amount of corn-based products and by-products in the air. Ethanol, acetic acid, and furfural are all compounds that relate to the increased production and use of corn in various industries in the United States. Stecklow became interested in corn as a common originator of these compounds and in how their residue links a singular corn cob to larger industrial, agricultural, and fuel industries. Since then, he has incorporated air samplers into his practice, each time creating an imprint of the environment at hand through the collection of “dust” in the air.



Also found on the carousels are four box sets, three of which are based on images the artist made of the floors of his living space during the Covid-19 pandemic. Working remotely on a show at the Bainbridge House

at Princeton University, Stecklow traced the outlines of each room onto his own, turning the floor areas of these segments into a type of maquette. Printed onto the sets are sketches of sculptures and excerpts of a string map of the Bainbridge House’s architectural outline as well as paper dots glued to the surfaces. The dots are inspired by Stecklow’s mother’s art practice and have become a shared formal feature. A fourth, newly produced box set, functions as a blank, waiting to reflect the imagery of its environment on its surface.

By offering many different points of entry—sites of arrival and departure—*Terminal* encapsulates the complexity and playfulness of Jesse Stecklow’s artistic practice. Things are never exactly as they seem and are most likely at least two things at once. The hybridity of his work comes from the transformation and circulation of different ideas, materials, functions, and narratives, whether that means going from ear to ear, from micro to macro, or from the personal to the cosmic. All these perspectives are flung into conversation, always ambiguous and absurd but never without connection to something else. What we find when we crack open the outer layer is another layer—or microcosm—following a stacking doll principle. But as things come and go, and as each new cycle begins, eventually, everything will move on to a new destination. Only an image will remain; a photograph taken at a certain time in a certain place, strewn with objects that might remind us of clouds. And slowly, as the days and the months and perhaps even the years go by, everything will be covered in dust—as every archive is—and we might ask ourselves, Was it arid or was it fertile?

1 *Littérature* 2, no. 5 (October 1922), 6.