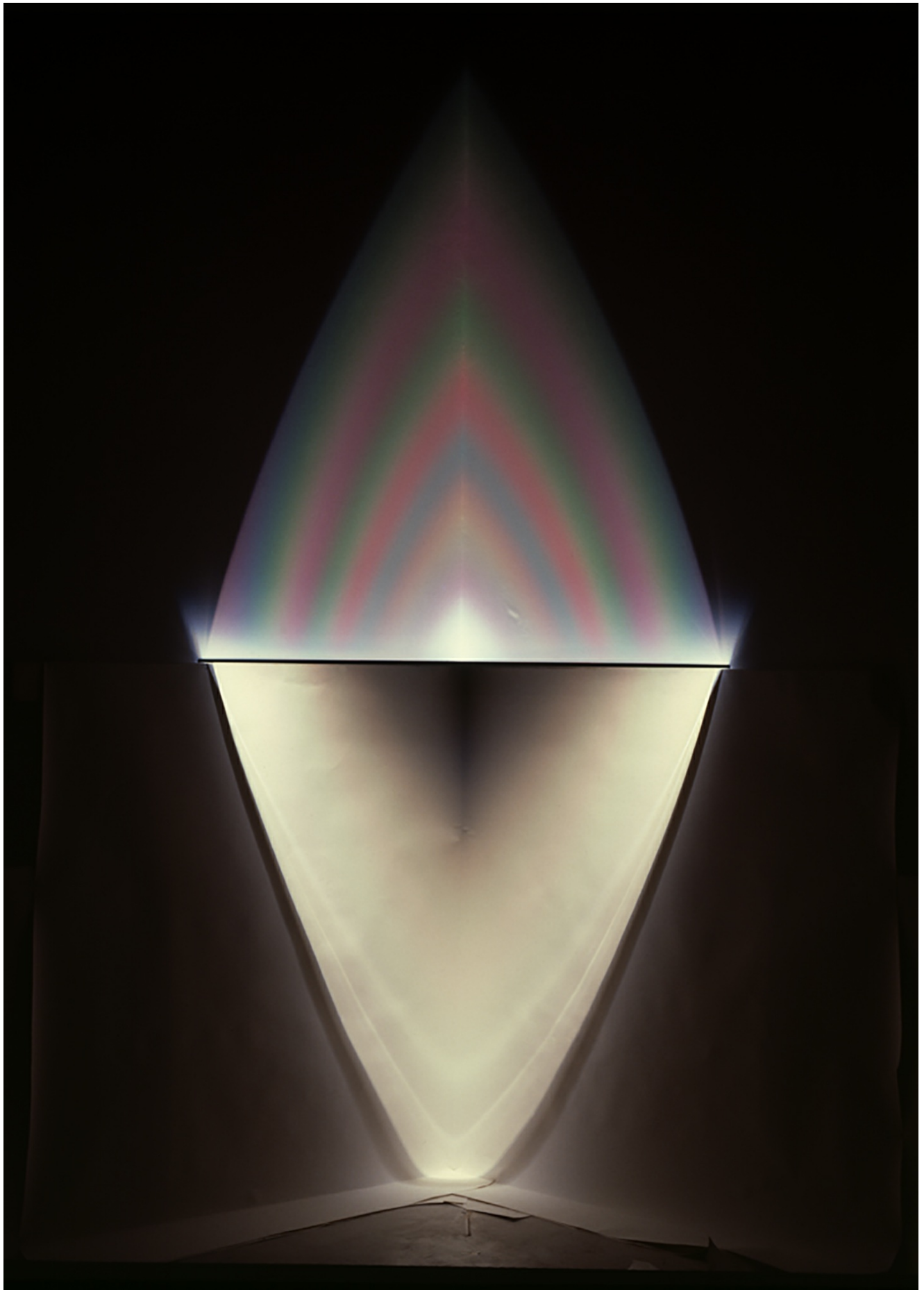


# A World without Angles: Larry Bell

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# ESSAYS Mousse 71

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by Marie de Brugerolle

In my opinion all artwork is stored energy.  
The art releases its power whenever a viewer becomes  
a dreamer.—Larry Bell, "In Reflection," 1997<sup>1</sup>

Born in 1939 in Chicago, Larry Bell grew up in Los Angeles, where he studied at the Chouinard Art Institute under Robert Irwin. In 1973 he went to Taos, New Mexico, and since 2003 he moves back and forth to his former studio in Venice, California. Since 2015 Bell has been an artist in residence at the Twentieth Church Christ, Scientist in Venice, where he creates his mirage works from a dwelling surrounded by stained glass. Bell's work has always been about exploring light and perception, as well as colors and movements on surfaces. Abolition of angle become the fundamental object of work that developed essentially from glass. In Taos, Bell invented a new process of making sublimations on glass panels using a vacuum machine he called the "Tank," which creates a void so that thin particles of metal can be deposited on the glass surface, forming remarkable puzzles of diffraction. Other methods such as photography, assemblage, and collage complete in various manners a large corpus of work. Bell continues to explore and invent new processes that remain a step ahead of his time and address our contemporary modes of traveling and living with screens.

## A Postminimal Sublime

Bell belongs to a generation of artists who were underestimated and considered eccentric because they worked outside the hegemonic New York scene. Dubbed the Light and Space Movement, the group included Robert Irwin, James Turrell, and Eric Orr, among others. As the art historian John C. Welchman puts it:

"At perceptual side effect to full-fledged syndrome, the dimensional edge would pose a direct, incremental, challenge to the premise of Greenbergian flatness. A first installment was delivered by lifting form off the wall, as in Robert Irwin's hovering, convex sculptures (spread acrylic on shaped aluminum), a second arrived with the reassertion of circumstantial weight in John McCracken's glossy planks propped up against the wall in a kind of casual repose (using polyester resin, fiberglass and plywood). Arriving at a kind of tongue-in-cheek formalism, which they crossed with perceptual finesse, these and other West Coast artists discovered that the terminus of pure surface was a form of real depth."<sup>2</sup>

This deepness of surface is at stake in various other recent reflections on the status of matter and objecthood, for instance Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology theory or Karen Barad's way of thinking matter. Especially in *Meeting the Universe Halfway, Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007), Barad's intra-action principle echoes what Robert Smithson—involved in the *Primary Structures* exhibition organized by the Jewish Museum, New York, in 1966—expressed about entropy. In his famous essay of the same year, Smithson mentioned Larry Bell's "hyper-opulence" work in comparison with the works of Paul Thek and Craig Kauffman: "The mirrored reflection in Bell's work are contaminations of a more elusive order. His chrome-plated lattices contain a Pythagorean chaos."<sup>3</sup> Reflections reflect reflections in an excessive but pristine manner. Thek's chrome framework had a sadistic geometry, and leftover flesh like horror-movie props. (Thek was making vitrines and working as an installer at Pace Gallery, New York, when Bell met him as a young artist, and we can see how the boxes within boxes of the one echo the nesting boxes of the other.)

Indeed, Bell's work had a strong impact on many artists, in different manners. Guy de Cointet met him through Viva Hoffmann at Andy Warhol's Factory and became his assistant. They collaborated on the *Animated Discourse* book published in 1975, which is a storyboard made with photos taken by Bell. The experiments with camera lenses create a 180 degree perception, with a peripheral vision. Donald Judd recognized Bell's importance and pioneering work in relation to space and colors, and Dan Graham mentioned Bell on his wall of fame in his exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, in 2009. The architect Frank Gehry, who collaborated with Bell, was impressed by his inventiveness, for example the glass panel installed in Bell's studio showing the tubing internal structure of the stairway. We can find an echo of Bell's researches and visions in the generation of artists that includes Ann Veronica Janssen, who since the mid-1990s have been rethinking vitrines and screens as interfaces.

As with Bell's friend Donald Judd, who settled in Marfa, Texas, and James Turrell, who works in Flagstaff, in the Arizona desert, Bell feels a connection to the land and the horizon line, and the reflection and refraction of light, that is specific to the West. Yet it is beyond landscape—really addressing the sublime. Arguably the American perception of the landscape happens through a car windshield—panoramic, Cinemascope, a moving image that slowly develops toward mirage. It is also a way to organize an artwork as a set and opens it to the environment, beyond gallery or museum walls.

## Unframed

I met Larry Bell for the first time in 2002, in Taos. At that time I was in Los Angeles researching Guy de Cointet, and we developed a discussion that led to his first large European survey: *Larry Bell, in Perspective* at Carré d'art in Nîmes, in 2011. His studio in New Mexico

was built around the aforementioned Tank. The Tank's function sounds like metaphor of Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915-1923), where the Bachelors seem to desperately try to reach the Bride's space above them (Duchamp was interested in the fourth dimension, and especially the physical and alchemical qualities of materials). Duchamp once visited Bell in his Venice studio. As recalled by curator Walter Hopps, who organized the first Duchamp retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963, "I showed Duchamp some pictures of [Bell's] work and he said: Oh, I'd love to meet him. So we drove out to Larry Bell's studio in Venice, and the two of them immediately started talking about glues and adhesives, fiberglass, silicone, and what have you. Occasionally Marcel would look at a work and said: This is so marvelous. If only I had epoxy."<sup>4</sup>

This anecdote reveals a lot about Duchamp and Bell. I've always seen Bell speaking with his artists and friends, about how it is made, about materials and making process. It is about work. Larry often says that the work is the "teacher," and that what he does is the evidence of an activity. This structural guise is not only about glass works but also the structure and relations to modern physics, quantum theories, and original filiations with science fiction, or anticipation. *If Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884) by Edwin Abbott Abbott is without doubt a key book whose reading modifies the perception of Duchamp's *Large Glass*. Another important source of inspiration is British writer H. G. Wells. In the beginning of *The Time Machine: an Invention* (1895), the Time Traveller explains his theory:

"I shall have to controvert one or two ideas that are almost universally accepted. The geometry, for instance, they taught you at school is founded on a misconception... I do not mean to ask you to accept anything without reasonable ground for it. You will soon admit as much as I need from you. You know of course that a mathematical line, a line of thickness nil, has no real existence. They taught you that? Neither has a mathematical plane. These things are mere abstractions."

"That is all right," said the Psychologist.

"Nor, having only length, breadth, and thickness, can a cube have a real existence."<sup>5</sup>

Having worked at a glass shop at the beginning of his career, when he was student, Bell knows well the material and its physical qualities: refraction, prism effects, the fact that it is always in constant movement. Reading this opening page of *The Time Machine* when visiting with Bell in Taos, I was struck by this connection with Wells, and this in turn gave me a new way of thinking about Bell's art itself. (Larry Bell is a reader and collector of H. G. Wells' books, not only for the science-fiction universe, but as way to think about the process of art making itself.) Robert Smithson has spoken of the Pythagorean chaos of Bell's reflection on meta-reflection. A singular trait of Bell's modus operandi is that it is rooted in an ongoing process of research into space, time, and movement. Consequently, the "Finish Fetish" and "California Minimalism" labels fail to properly capture an artistic process that draws on real experience and is constantly being subjected to experimentation. Involved here is a form of the sublime that tests the limits of the machine and is deeply grounded in a certain period and landscape, capable of inspiring emotions that are quite independent of fashion. At once mathematical and sensual, Bell's work immerses us in a new dimension, one where *Homo spectator* becomes daydreamer.

The question of *The Time Machine*—which is also one of Bell's unique works (*The Time Machine* [2002])—makes an appropriate link to Bell's corpus, given the latter's constant probing of the limits of perception, as contained within the limits of orthonormal rules. Peripheral perception is at the center of his researches. Glass, his favorite material, enables reflection and opacity, and allows him to invent new processes to create sculptural objects that blur the borders between painting and sculpture: "After having considered that a painting is in itself a volume, I did sculptures based on the shape of a canvas, which took the principle of a window."<sup>6</sup> Doing this, Bell took a huge step beyond traditional Renaissance representative painting, which was, per Leon Battista Alberti, a window on the fiction of the world. In Bell's world, there isn't a frame on the window borders, only glass stands, like a mirror-threshold open on the world.

#### Abolition of the Right Angle

Looking around his studio walls, one notes that Bell recognizes the element present in any architecture but nonexistent in nature: the right angle. His project, one might say, has been based on the abolition of the ninety-degree angle. Not that Bell's work is about a return to nature; on the contrary, it is grounded in the most cutting-edge formal concerns and techniques, which are used to invent forms that open onto new experiences. *Corner Lamp* (1980) creates a mandorla shape thanks to a finely tuned adjustment to an extremely simple device: a sheet of glass and a spotlight. The artifice is not immediately obvious, and at first sight we are bathed in a set of colored light sensations. Our perception is disturbed by the play of transparency and opacity. Indeed, the installation is simple in principle but complicated to realize perfectly. It requires a high ceiling and the correct projection into the corner so that the prisms of the border of the glass create this luminous halo.

The lamps arrived at the same time as a series of *Chairs De Lux* (1980-1981), which is also based on the elliptical shape. The original first chair is a found object from 1965, discovered in a thrift shop, which is exactly one quarter of an ellipse. When installed together, *Corner Lamp* and *De Lux Chairs* create a magical ensemble, like in the improvised installation at the Detroit Institute of Arts, in 1982, which led the artist to re-invent the piece named *The Cat* (1981). Panels of glass consisting of twelve sections combine four rectangular and eight triangular shapes. The title comes also from Wells' *The Invisible Man* (1897), in which the first attempt to make a creature invisible involved a cat. The character Griffin is convinced that a person can become invisible and reappear according to a realignment of molecules.

We can compare this combination and permutations of glass panels that started with *The Cat* and with the development of *The Iceberg and Its Shadow* (1974-1975), a masterpiece composed of fifty-six panels measuring fifty-seven to one hundred inches by sixty inches, first presented in 1977 at the MIT List Visual Art Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The project was to explore the possibilities of rearrangements and visual games: "What I've learned from *The Iceberg* [is] that it was not necessary to use every part of every sculpture, should a space be inadequate to accommodate. My installations change the feeling of the space the sculpture occupied. Each installation became a *tableau* of light and surface."<sup>7</sup> *The Iceberg and Its Shadow* is a unique example of work that develops the metonymic principle, and a real event in history of sculpture. It is more than an in-situ "installation;" it deals with the properties of an art object compared to any kind of daily

thing. Because it creates relations with the floor and walls and radically challenges the architecture, it gives the viewer a new place. From spectatorship to witness condition, we become part of the work, ubiquitous entities. *The Iceberg and Its Shadow* was Bell's first work with slanted panels and colors. He added quartz in the surface of the glass, which increased the perception of the wavelength close to ultraviolet that gave it a bluish surface, like a huge volume of ice on water. Larry Bell's technique uses the diffraction effect of thin particles of metal, addressing the question of vision and perception of light. Thus, permutations and chance as principles imbue the work with an openness that accords with Bell's belief in stored energy. The standing walls make us become part of it, because of our own reflection in it.

### Nobody but Everybody

Appearing and disappearing, angles create zebras, and like icebergs become a fractal screen. Ghostly effects come inasmuch from mirror reflections, transparency, and opacity. The world reflects on the piece: cars, trees, people. At first glance, we think that Bell's standing walls are perceptions in volume. They are paintings abstracted from canvas or frame, colors dancing. Bell began from the corners of the room, cutting the angles of the canvas, throwing a stone to the glass to create sometimes square with zigzag patterns or broken lines. He still paints, but directly with light on glass, like if the skylight was his palette. Red is one of the most difficult tints to use in glass. That is why *Pacific Red II* (2017), with its huge cubes, is impressive. Presented during the 2017 Whitney Biennial in New York, this work is made of six groups of laminated glass parallelepipeds. Its layers of glass have a structure in which a tinted plastic film is sandwiched between two sheets of clear glass. Red declinations sound like a poem: "Carmine, Cerise, Red Poppy, Blush, Hibiscus." From the darker to the lighter, the combination of outside and inside box with open tops and bottoms creates a shift from the earlier cubes. Each module has only four panels, and container or content are non-closed forms.

Bell keeps renewing and reinventing his work in dialogue with the spaces in which it is installed. On the top of the Whitney Museum, the red shapes created a strong highline that contrasted with the skyline of the city. The laminated glass is not sparkling or diffracting, as was the metal coating of older pieces like the *Chevrons* shapes (mid- Seventies and Eighties). Continuing his research on the capacities of the medium, the artist has realized the "foggy" series. Examples include *Venice Fog I* and *Venice Fog II* (both 2017), installed in the courtyard of Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles, in 2018, or the smoky and milky *True Fog* (2018) and *Sea Salt* (2018), box-in-box "suites" resonating with the ghostly effects of the early boxes and cubes from the 1960s. The inside is sometimes darker than the outside. Instead of the disappearing effect produced by the vacuum-coated glass that creates a sparkling pixel effect, the "milky" sensation of a shell in a shell matches a new vibrant synchronicity. Addressing our "screen-time," the new *Iceberg* prospective, with their blue, white, gray, and black colors reveal next possible steps. Like folded sheets of color or rhomboid pyramids, the models and large works invite troubling perceptions.

Combining prismatic and auratic reflection with illusions of levitation, the smaller pieces ask us to bow slightly, whereas the larger standing panels displayed on plinths make us think back to Auguste Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais* (1884-1889) and the beginning of modern sculpture. We can think as well about Rosalind Krauss's words in her book *The Optical Unconscious* (1993) on Clement Greenberg's approach to Jackson Pollock's paintings and his use of metallic paint. The relations to the wall, and the holy space of the traditional icon, the gold leaf, is at work here: "Pollock uses metallic paint in much the same sense that early painters applied gold leaf, to add a feeling of mystery and adornment."<sup>8</sup> This ongoing vibrato is like the sparkling flow of water from a fountain, shaping light through space and movement. Installed in a public park in Mönchengladbach, a city in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, Bell's sculpture deals with our contemporary feeling of being always behind or in front of a screen—not only the "selfie effect," the photogenic duty of art today, but a feeling of passing by, being in between, like an interface. The human figure stands in Bell's work, but too quick to be trapped in an image.

From his first paintings to the angle-cut and unframed standing walls, Larry Bell has explored the interaction of light on surface to create an open breach in our mundane perception. From and with matter, stepping back to look at the work and from this moving toward the next step, his work is a continuous lesson. The *Light Knots* (2013), which explore the light movement of air, are made of Mylar sheets. They float just above us from the ceiling, reflecting the environment in which our image can be simultaneously trapped. They express what a Mobius strip can be, or what a superstring universe looks like. Bell's work is an expanding vision that goes beyond the frontiers of sculpture or painting, because energy is its main tool—energy stored in matter and relieved by combinations of shapes. We are inside the glass panels, diffracting the world, in an ongoing interaction with it. The experience seems apt in our current context of confinement, behind the glass of our windows, obliged to keep a distance from our human pals and watch the world through screens. Enlarging our capacities to stand, conveying the dimensions of colors reflected by light, Bell's glass works make us time travelers who wish to still stand today.

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1. Larry Bell, "In Reflection," in *Zones of Experience: The Art of Larry Bell* (Albuquerque: Albuquerque Museum, 1997), 55.
2. John C. Welchman, "Light Metal," in *Larry Bell in Perspective* (Nîmes: Carré d'art, 2011), 38.
3. Robert Smithson, "Entropy and New Monuments," *Artforum* 4, no. 10 (June 1966). This article is reprinted in the exhibition catalogue *Robert Smithson: une rétrospective: le paysage entropique 1960–1973* (Marseille: MAC Musées de Marseille, 1994), 314.
4. Walter Hopps, *The Dream Colony: A Life in Art* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 52.
5. H. G. Wells. *The Time Machine* (London: Pan Books, 1956), 7-8.
6. Bell, "In Reflection," 54.
7. Bell, "In Reflection," 58.
8. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 24.

Larry Bell (b. 1939, Chicago) lives and works between Taos, New Mexico, and Venice, California. From 1957 to 1959 he attended Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, where he studied under Robert Irwin. Since the 1960s Bell's work has been positioned at the intersection of Southern California's Light and Space Movement and New York Minimalism. Notable solo exhibitions include *Larry Bell. Still Standing*, Hauser & Wirth, New York (2020); *Venice Fog: Recent Investigations*, Hauser & Wirth, Zurich (2018); *Aspen Blues*, Aspen Art Museum, Colorado (2018); *Pacific Red*, Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, Malibu (2017); *From the '60s*, Hauser & Wirth, New York (2016); *6 X 6 An Improvisation*, Chinati Foundation, Marfa (2014); and *Larry Bell in Perspective*, Carré d'art, Nîmes (2011). Bell's work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Tate, London; Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Marie de Brugerolle is a curator, writer, and inventor of Post-Performance Future, a concept and method questioning the legacy of performativity on the visual arts. She develops ongoing researches about objects and the polysphere, at the crossroads of archaeology and futurology. She is the leading authority on the French-born Californian artist Guy de Cointet and has been instrumental in introducing Californian conceptual art to European audiences, having organized the first retrospectives of Allen Ruppersberg (1996); Guy de Cointet (2004); John Baldessari (2005); and Larry Bell (2010). She has worked extensively on the question of reenactment, including restaging final works by Guy de Cointet: *Five Sisters* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012), and *Bridegroom Suites* at Musée M, Leuven (2017). Recent collaborations include *I Was a Male Yvonne de Carlo*, MUSAC, Léon (2011) and *ALL THAT FALLS*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2014). Other recent curatorial projects include *LA EXISTANCIAL*, LACE, Los Angeles (2013); *RIDEAUX/blinds*, Institut d'art contemporain, Villeurbanne (2015); *SPACEY FOREVER Los Angeles (a mini series)* (2018); *SALON DISCRET*, MNAM, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2017); and *CBARET What Not/Speakeasy*, LAXART, Los Angeles (2019).

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