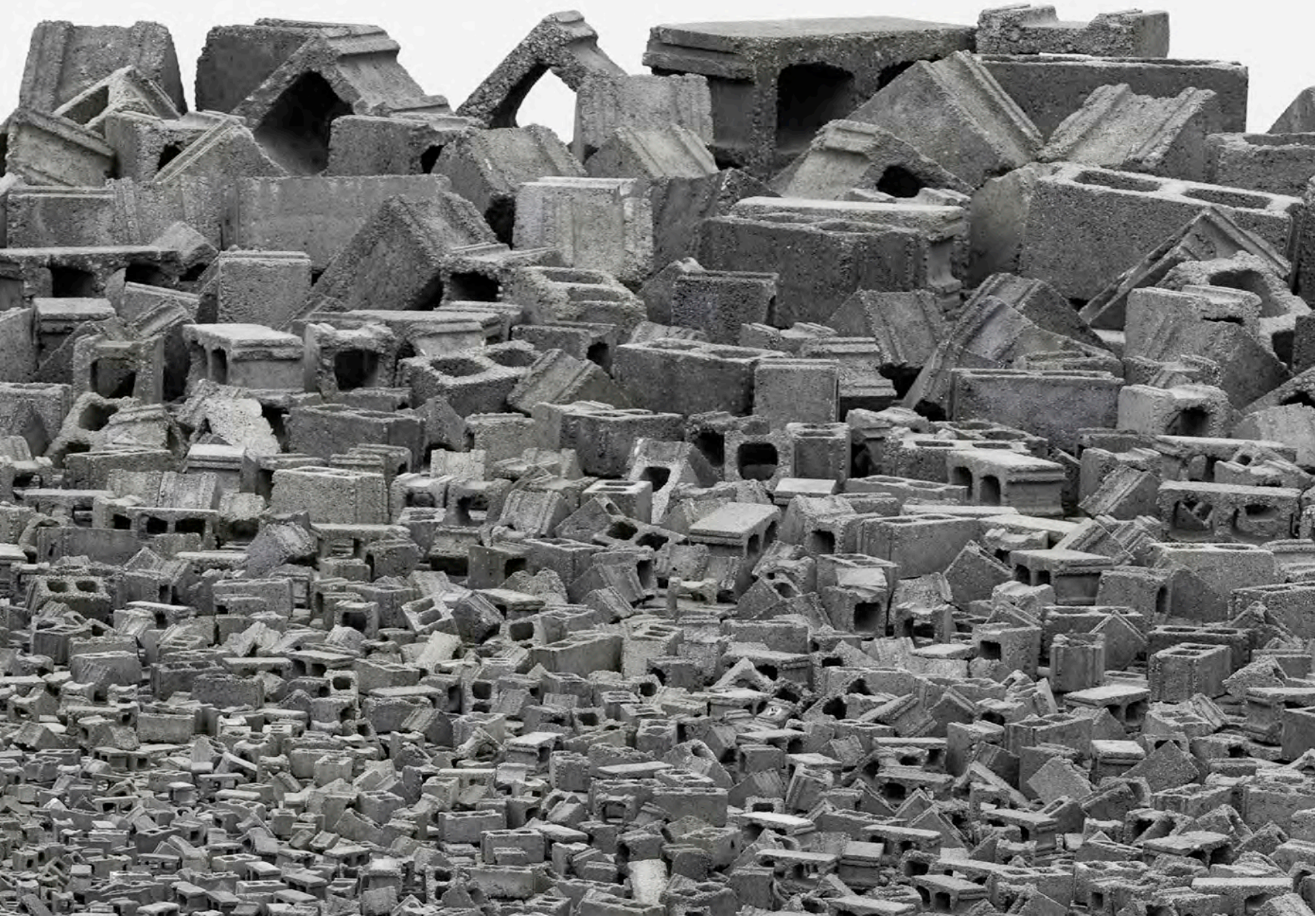
Aaron T Stephan

MURMUR

at
The Center for Maine Contemporary Art
Rockland, Maine

2026





Notes On “Murmur” (Or: Minimalism Has Always Been Camp)

Grant Wahlquist

In his seminal 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood” Michael Fried proposed that the “crucial distinction” between Minimalist sculpture and modernism was “between work that is fundamentally theatrical and work that is not.”[1] For Fried, theatricality was “concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters [Minimalist] work[,]” “a kind of *stage* presence[,]” and “a sensibility *already* theatrical, already (to say the worst) corrupted or perverted by theater.” Fried disliked theatricality: “[T]heater and theatricality are at war today, not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such[.]”

In her equally seminal 1964 essay “Notes on Camp” Susan Sontag defined camp as a sensibility of “failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of failed experience.”[2] For Sontag, camp was a way of seeing “everything in quotation marks,” of being “alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken,” and of finding “a private zany experience of the thing.” Sontag honored camp: “Camp is a *tender* feeling” and “among the great creative sensibilities[.]”

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[1] Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* (Summer 1967), 12-23.
[2] Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, 275-92.

If the parallelism in the preceding paragraphs hasn't clued you in, I think Minimalism is itself camp, or that it can at least operate in a camp mode—and I'm not the first to think so. In a 2013 conversation with theorist and critic Jennifer Doyle, art historian David Getsy described Minimalism and camp's kinship as follows: "[F]or everything else it does, Minimalism also produced intentionally useless things that refused to be anything other than themselves." Getsy explains that this mode of production is a "love of obsolescence" that is a "form of resistance to normative values[,]" a "refusal to instrumentalize art as productive or illustrative[.]"[3]

Aaron T Stephan's exhibition *Murmur* at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art is camp Minimalism *par excellence*. Comprised of thousands of concrete blocks, *Murmur* fills CMCA's largest gallery, the blocks splayed out on its concrete floor in an orderly square in a variety of sizes that become vanishingly small as they approach the center of the room. Stephan individually cast each block and as a result they live on the threshold of block and "block" (to paraphrase Sontag), of utility and intentional uselessness (to paraphrase Getsy). If you're looking for a "private zany experience" of the concrete block—as curator Jaime DeSimone points out in these pages, Stephan's engagement with the concrete block as form is longstanding—you need look no further.

Murmur is camp not just in its ironic approach to the basic form of the concrete block, but also in its treatment of Minimalist installation as a practice in itself. It tackles obvious art historical precedents, as numerous Minimalist and post-Minimalist artists adopted concrete blocks as material (Carl Andre, Robert Grosvenor, Sol LeWitt) or created large sculptural fields (Walter de Maria in particular). *Murmur*'s original title was, in fact, *Block Field*, a nod both to de Maria (*e.g.*, *The Lightning Field*, 1977) and a groaning pun on the word" block" (the work literally "blocks"

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[3] Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy, "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation," *Art Journal* (Vo. 72,

access to the center of the field on which it sits). It honors and sends up these antecedents equally, demonstrating precisely the kind of complicated response to them that is properly characterized as queer.

Stephan's camp Minimalism is particularly queer in its refusal of binary categories of artistic production and enjoyment. Without a doubt, the artist knows how to *impress*—whether working in the context of the gallery or in public sculpture, his skill as a craftsman and capacity to execute at great and complicated scale are second to none—yet there is always a healthy dose of winking humor that refuses straightforward heroism. In addition to *Murmur*'s humorous treatment of its Minimalist predecessors, this humor functions materially and in its title. The labor inherent in *Murmur*'s production and installation packs a punch, but by incorporating blocks that become Lilliputian in scale the entire activity registers as absurd. Likewise, notwithstanding its large scale, *Murmur*'s title denotes soft speaking, quietude, discretion, and indistinction. Like a giant amplifier with the sound turned nearly all the way off, it is potent and impotent at the same time.

Though originally conceived some time ago, *Murmur*'s anti-heroism is what strikes me most in the present moment. Heroic sculpture tends to cycle in and out of fashion, and monuments do too. Having addressed the monument as form and phenomena in other works, there is zero doubt Stephan is aware of this fact. Likewise, his experience in the field of public art has surely involved a fair degree negotiating with those who would instrumentalize his work. *Murmur* is a monumental anti-monument and a heroic feat of uselessness. Its long-

awaited arrival at CMCA simultaneously with exhibitions at other institutions negotiating the complicated history of public sculpture (*MONUMENTS* at The Museum of Contemporary Art and The Brick in Los Angeles in particular) feels foreordained. It is a stunning reminder that, as the late artist Philip Core glossed on Sontag, camp is “the heroism of people not called upon to be heroes.”[4]

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[4] Philip Core, *Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth* (New York: Delilah Books, 1984), 15.

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THE LARGE ILLUSTRATION on this page shows our Wizard Face Down Concrete Block Machine with the cores withdrawn from the mold box ready to receive the face mixture. After the facing has been placed in the flask the cores are entered by stepping on the floor lever and then the flask is filled with the coarser mixture.

THE PROCESS OF MAKING CONCRETE BLOCKS on this machine is shown by the five small illustrations below and you will note by observing the same that the operator is tamping the material in the first illustration, this tamping being all done after the cores have been entered without refilling the flask. The three following illustrations show the operator in the process of releasing the block, and you will note here that the complete process is done with the action of the levers and requires only three separate and distinct acts. First—In turning the flask over, thereby placing the block on its pallet. Second—By releasing the end doors. Third—By lifting three-quarters of the flask away from the block; every action done with the two levers. The fifth illustration shows the operator lifting the block away from the machine, and doing so by grasping the handles in the pallet, this feature being known to our machine only, as other machines require a carrying device when lifting the block away from the machine.

THE CONSTRUCTION of the Wizard is mechanically perfect in every detail, all parts are made of the best quality of iron and fitted together in such a form as to work smoothly and accurately, giving the operator perfect dimensions, corners and impressions for every block that he makes.

THE STAND is heavy, well supported with ribs and braces, making it rigid, so that it does not twist, shift or sag when making a block.

THE FLASK is made on the face down principle and all parts of the flask swing from perfect centers, so that the mold will square up in perfect shape when closed and open with ease. Not one part will interfere with the block when releasing and cause any damage.

THE CORES are two in number on the 16-inch length machine and three on the 24-inch length; they are elliptical in shape and are proportioned so as to give a ratio of 33⅓ per cent air space to 66⅔ per cent bearing area, this being the standard requirements of all building ordinances. The elliptical shape of the core permits the material when being tamped to follow the sides to the center under the cores, so that the material is of even consistency throughout. This construction eliminates previous tamping which is common to machines of other makes, and does away with all danger of breaking the block due to previous tamping.

OUR CHALLENGE OFFER

ORDER this Wizard Machine, the size you desire, as listed below, and we will ship it with a complete outfit, including twenty-five pallets, as described to the right; you can compare it with other machines, you can test it out thoroughly for thirty days, and if it does not make better blocks, if it does not make them faster, and if this Wizard Machine does not work easier and better than any other machine on the market, even though the other machine costs twice the price you paid for the Wizard, you can return it at our expense of freight charges both ways and we will immediately return the money sent us, together with any freight charges you may have paid.

You will find that, although the Wizard may contain several mechanical parts or details, it is not a complicated machine, as it does not contain gears, sprockets, springs, slides or ratchets and details of that kind that are so liable to become clogged with concrete material and interfere with the smooth working of the machine. Every mechanical detail on the Wizard is simple, essential, gains time, helps to make a perfect block and saves work.

WE BIND OURSELVES TO PROTECT EVERY CUSTOMER IN EVERY WAY AS TO ANY CLAIMED INFRINGEMENT OF PATENTS, TRADEMARKS OR COPYRIGHTS ON ANY GOODS BOUGHT FROM US IN THE PAST, PRESENT OR FUTURE.

THE LEVERS are attached to the flask in such a way that they work all parts that require shifting.

THE AUTOMATIC CORE EXTRACTOR is attached to the cores and frame, so that when tilting the machine to relieve the block the cores are withdrawn automatically and do not require separate handling.

THE SHELF can be placed on either side of the machine, making it convenient to place the tools not in use when operating the machine.

THE PALLET is constructed of iron, very light and well reinforced, and contains holes for the cores to pass through, and handles so that the block can be lifted away from the machine without a carrying device. We furnish twenty-five of these pallets with each machine, but it is necessary for the operator to have as many pallets as he will make blocks per day.

THE WIZARD IS A BIG PROFIT MAKER.

It is a machine that is setting a pace for all others in that it makes more blocks per day for each man, and better blocks. Although the Wizard has all the best qualities of a block machine, it is sold to you at an extremely low price and at the same time in competition with others, and you will find after comparing it with other makes of machines, in efficiency, construction and the quality of the blocks it turns out, that it will outclass them all. **In comparing the Wizard as a money maker** with other machines such as are sold for two and three times what we ask for the Wizard, you will find that the best that any one man can make in the number of blocks per day on a machine that is a direct competitor of the Wizard is about sixty (60) to seventy-five (75) blocks in a ten-hour day. Figuring the cost of material and the price of labor for each block, it will average about 11 cents apiece, and the cost to make seventy-five (75) blocks a day would be $8.25. The average price received for these blocks is about 17 cents each; this will give you a profit of 6 cents a block, or a net profit of $4.50 for your day's work. **One man with our Wizard can make** one hundred and twenty-five (125) blocks a day; the cost of material and labor in proportion to the slow machine would be 9 cents a block; the average price received for each block being 17 cents would give a profit of 8 cents a block or a net profit of $10.00 a day for one man's labor. The Wizard can be operated equally as well with two men and when doing so one man can devote his time to mixing and the other to making the blocks. This would double the capacity of the Wizard, giving two hundred and fifty (250) blocks per day for two men, at a profit of 8 cents a block or a net profit of $20.00 a day on two men's labor.

Building ordinances generally approve the 8x9x16-inch blocks made on our No. 11B5502, listed below.

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FIRST OPERATION. Tamping the Material, Face Down.



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No. 11B5501 Wizard Machine complete, with outfit to make 8x8x16-inch blocks. Shipping weight, 610 pounds. Price **$42.50**

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Block Wizard

Jaime DeSimone

Cheap, durable, ubiquitous. Concrete blocks possess multiple meanings in American culture: shelter, home-ownership, industriousness, and the promise of building. The Sears, Roebuck and Co.'s catalogue's "Wizard" Face Down Concrete Block Machine guaranteed, for a modest investment of $42.50, almost anyone could acquire the means to manufacture blocks, erect structures like houses or walls, and earn profit. It offered a blueprint for self-reliance and economic mobility through one's own labor. You *could* make up to 250 blocks a day. You *could* produce raw materials into something durable and permanent. You *could* turn a profit of up to $20 per day! The ad was about the American Dream, about independence, about transforming concrete into both commodity and shelter. Literal, physical, and economic building blocks.

For more than a decade, Aaron T Stephan has interrogated this seductive sales pitch and the Wizard's magic wand, or handle that left the consumer "face down in concrete." Instead, the sculptor calls the Wizard's bluff and ups the ante. He even purchased a vintage machine through a Craigslist ad in rural Maine, producing only a single, rusticated block with the mid-century contraption in 2017.

That same year, Stephan constructed *Cement Houses and How to Build Them* at Locust Projects in Miami, Florida. By hand-casting hundreds of blocks, with his own hand-crafted block machine, and assembling an architectural façade drawn from early 20th-century mail-order “kit house” plans, Stephan recalls the dream of “easy” home construction, the idea that with tools and a plan, one could craft one’s own house. But Stephan’s meticulous version is also a reminder of the labor and its inefficiency—how dare he unveil its myth, gasp and sigh… What is promised in those ads is obscured by what was left unsaid: the cost of land, materials, skilled (or unskilled) labor, scale, infrastructure, and time. By building only a façade, Stephan exposes the illusion and inherent incompleteness of the Sears kit house’s packaged promise.

When *Block Field* debuted at Thompson’s Point in Portland, Maine in 2023, it presented a contemporary take on the concrete block as a metaphor for collapse, reconstruction, and communal reckoning. Now reconfigured in *Murmur*, Stephan restages the installation of approximately 5,000 hand-made blocks produced over several years. Perhaps he finally outsmarted the Wizard? Ranging from under an inch to more than 22 inches long, the blocks are arranged within CMCA’s largest gallery with the biggest at the perimeter, gradually shrinking toward the center, visually pulling the viewer inward like a vortex or implosion.

Murmur emphasizes not only the physical weight of these blocks—thousands of pounds—but also the symbolic weight of history, inequality, and the tension between what is built and what collapses. It reflects on how social structures are being dismantled or reimagined. From process to permanence, or even impermanence, there is endurance, heartbreak, and beauty in the desire and destruction faced by so many Americans today. The trajectory of Stephan’s concrete block remains central as it shifts roles: from building tool to artistic medium to symbolic rhetoric and sublime rubble.





Murmuration

Marie B. Shurkus

Murmuration describes the phenomena of hundreds of thousands of birds flying in a dynamic but coordinated manner, creating mesmerizing patterns that quickly dissolve into each other only to re-emerge in new, magnificent, and equally temporary formations. Appearing at dusk near the horizon, murmuration embodies a relational operation that relies upon each bird responding to the movements of the individual birds that immediately surround it. Through these individual choreographed acts, a brilliant image of movement, passing through bodies in flight, takes shape as night descends. Although completely still, Aaron T Stephan's installation *Murmur* creates a similarly mesmerizing effect. In this installation we also witness the force of movement passing through thousands of material objects, yet these forms are actually stationary. As a result, their configuration conveys the sensibility of a moving image put on pause, yet stuttering. With each object seemingly held in the midst of tumbling, a relational pattern takes shape across the field of 5000 objects. Amazingly enough, this mesmerizing sense of stopped motion is being expressed through the materiality of concrete blocks!

By definition, concrete references the opposite of abstraction; instead of flights of fancy, it points to the actual: solidity, weight, and a sense of being down to earth. With this definition in mind, it is not surprising that "concrete" also names one of the most ubiquitous building materials used throughout the modern era. Composed of cement,

water, and stone aggregate, concrete actually dates back to the Roman Empire, where it was used to construct such impressive structures as the Pantheon's unreinforced dome, the Roman Colosseum, and many other buildings that remain standing more than a millennia after their construction. Nevertheless, when the Roman Empire fell in the fifth century, it took with it the recipe for making concrete.[1] The meteoric increase of building with concrete that defined the late 19th and 20th centuries can be traced back to 1824, when English stone-mason Joseph Aspen developed Portland Cement, a binder that significantly increased both the strength and versatility of concrete. With this new recipe in place, concrete blocks soon replaced stone and wood as the preferred building material for supporting domestic houses.[2] As the 20th century continued, numerous architects capitalized upon the extreme moldability of wet concrete to create magnificent sturdy structures such as the tubular spiraling floors of Frank Lloyd Wright's 1939 Guggenheim Museum or the concrete shells adorning Jorn Utzon's 1973 Sydney Opera House, which appear to be billowing in the wind.[3] In these examples and countless others, architects celebrated concrete's apparent fluidity, a quality that led architectural historian Adrian Forty to describe concrete as "architecture's most transformative technological development in the 20th century."[4] Despite Forty's praise and the enduring precedents from the Roman Empire, most of the concrete structures built in the early 20th century are now either falling apart or have already been demolished due to structural instabilities. Moreover, the on-going manufacture of concrete now accounts for an estimated eight percent of all global carbon dioxide emissions.[5]

Murmur is the latest manifestation of Stephan's more than decade-long investigation of concrete as an aesthetic material. When viewers approach *Murmur*, they will immediately recognize the most common configuration of

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[1] Adrian Forty, "*Concrete and Culture: A Material History,"* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012.)
[2] Courland, 273-330.
[3] Robert Courland, *Concrete Planet*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 2011.) 118-135.
[4] Courland, 193-209.
[5] Courland, 22-23.

modern concrete, namely “the block.” At first glance this field of concrete blocks—some laid on their sides, others upright or leaning atop other blocks—call to mind urban ruins left in the wake of war or disaster. This reference to the demise of urban civilization is no doubt part of the meaning of concrete, and it cannot be ignored as a referent tied to this installation. However, it would be a mistake to reduce *Murmur* to the legacy of concrete. Situated in the otherwise pristine gallery space, not only is the event that presumably caused this ruin nowhere apparent, but further attention reveals other lines of flight. All of the 5000 blocks remain perfectly contained within a forty-foot square shape situated on the gallery floor. Significantly, there is no frame or physical structure keeping the blocks contained within this square configuration, nor is there any form of adhesive binding the individual blocks in place. In fact, not unlike a murmuration, this installation relies upon a relational composition in which each block must be in balance with all of the individual blocks surrounding it on the gallery floor.

Traditionally, the gallery floor had been a space reserved for viewers to contemplate artworks from a distance. This division of gallery space shifted dramatically in the 1960s, when Minimalist sculptors abandoned pedestals and strategically positioned their abstract geometric sculptures directly on the floor. In part this strategic move was designed to confront viewers more fully with the temporal presence and specific physicality of their artworks. Accordingly, minimalist sculptures either towered over viewers or engaged their attention through a linear progression of multiple, identical forms that created the illusion of movement. Ultimately, both approaches were specifically designed to prevent viewers from developing a psychic distance from the artwork, which since the 18th century had been deemed necessary to generate aesthetic experiences.[6]

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[6] See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans., James Creed Meredith (Oxford University Press, 1978).

Stephan's *Murmur* engages strategies similar to those of the Minimalists, but toward different ends. The stature of the installation never exceeds much more than sixteen inches, the height of a standard concrete block when positioned upright. Rather than using height to conjure a sense of an imposing presence, *Murmur* spreads out across the floor. However, these blocks are not multiples. Looking out from the periphery of the installation, viewers soon discover that what first appeared to be broken and crumbling blocks in the center of the square space are actually intact concrete blocks that have been cast in smaller sizes. In fact, the blocks gradually decrease in size as they approach the center of the composition on the floor, creating the illusion of a crater near the center of the square. The deliberate placement of the concrete blocks in the composition comes together with the decreasing size of the blocks to produce the disorienting perception that the blocks are actually moving or tumbling toward some central void in the floor, drawing them to a place beyond the horizon. In this regard, *Murmur* seems to generate the illusionary effect of a vanishing point; however, one that has moved from the confines of a painting mounted on the wall, to a rectangular installation that is almost flush with the floor. This shift orchestrates an informative transformation of this traditional painterly motif.

Leon Alberti's system of one-point perspective was designed to put the artist and the viewer in a fixed position that created a static and ideal point of view from which to view the illusionary depth of the representation. Describing this effect, Alberti drew upon the metaphor of looking out a window on the world.[7] Toward this end, the vanishing point sets up a relay between the viewer's impression of a static and coherent worldview and a psychic experience of a similarly ordered self.[8] However, in *Murmur* the viewer's position is not fixed and the so-called "window on the world" has been closed; instead of stabilizing subjectivity, the relay between the illusion of movement and the

[7] Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006.) 28-29.
[8] Cecil Grayson, "Introduction," Alberti's *De pictura*, Leon Alberti (London: Phaidon Press,1972) 12.

grounded installation produces a disorienting effect that destabilizes reason and opens up the subject to a sublime experience. According to the 18th century aesthetic philosopher Immanuel Kant the sublime encounter threatens the integrity of the subject with a sensual perception that goes beyond what the senses can measure and understand. In this scenario, Kant explains, reason will intercede and offer a conceptual interpretation of what is otherwise incomprehensible. In doing so, the rational function rescues the subject from the threat of absolute uncertainty or excess.[9] For example, the seemingly endless skies of J.M.W. Turner's Romantic landscapes become manageable and therefore understandable under the conceptual idea of being "infinitely large." *Murmur*, on the other hand, actively resists this logical and linguistic capture of the perceptual by giving viewers a perception of movement that literally acts as a hallucination.

Ultimately, Kant's project was built around preserving a unified subjectivity at all costs.[10] However, the 20th century philosopher Gilles Deleuze intercepted Kant's narrative precisely at the point when the subject encounters the sublime event. Rather than cognition stepping in to resolve the incomprehensible perception for the subject, Deleuze lets the Kantian subject disintegrate because for Deleuze, Kant's belief in a stable subject was always a mythological illusion. Instead of a rational conception intercepting the illogical perception, Deleuze allows the catastrophe of the sublime encounter to unfold, which allows for a passage into what he will later call "spaces of pure connection," where all "orientations, landmarks and linkages are in continual variation."[11] Within this space of haptic awareness, there are no clear references to be made, no conceptual identities emerge to stabilize the flow of energy and the network of connections. Instead of a stabilized backdrop of subjectivity, Deleuze argues that

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[9] Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans., Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 102. For a more complete exploration of Deleuze's engagement with Kant see Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, trans., Hugh Tomlinson, Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
[10] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans., Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 493.
[11] Kant, 90-207.

subjectivity continues to emerge against and in response to a virtual field of “impersonal and pre-individual” energies.[12]

Central to Deleuze’s derailment of Kant’s theory is the almost practical question of how can the subject fall apart, disintegrate, and yet not cease to exist? In fact, herein lies the most powerful implication of the sublime, which is an understanding of our own subjectivity as a relational or more topological form that is in a continuous state of transition, continually modulating in relationship to the world not unlike the condition of wet cement. To paraphrase this in terms of Kant’s narrative: when the imagination accepts the invitation or imposition of the world and when the threatened subject steps forward and embraces the potential for a transformative experience, the subjectivity that emerges through this experience cannot be the same as that which initially entered into it. By releasing the vanishing point from its dual role of upholding the illusionary space of representation to stabilize viewers’ experiences, *Murmur* asserts its concrete materiality as embodying movement and reclaims time as an unfolding lived experience that is defined by that movement. In this regard, Stephan invokes what has sometimes been called the contemporary crisis of subjectivity but might be more accurately understood as the affective condition of life as an experience of movement and transition.

Much of Stephan’s work is specifically designed to probe the affective expressions of material compositions and the relationships that these expressions cultivate within viewers’ bodies. Accordingly, the work carefully side-steps conceptual narratives tied to categorical identities and the rationalities that bind these categories. Instead Stephan’s work focuses our attention on the qualitative powers that emanate from physical materials. Central to

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[12] Paul de Man “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,” *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 87.

this approach is an effort to enhance our awareness of how material objects convey information differently from symbolic forms. Toward this end, Stephan bases his work on common recognizable forms. As Stephan explained in a recent interview, “I always want to make art from things that exist in the world around me. For example, with the concrete block pieces, I’m not trying to represent a concrete block. I’m making a concrete block. Period. I might make it smaller, I might make it bigger, I might change the color, but the artwork itself begins and ends as an object in the world.”[13] Toward this end, many of Stephan’s recent works feature tools or structures that are commonly used in building construction, such as ladders (*Paths Rising*, 2021), guard rails (*Woven Lines* 2022), pillars (*28 Columns*, 2014) and now the concrete block in *Murmur*. In part, Stephan’s fidelity to presenting these objects as actual and not represented forms is about directly engaging individual viewers’ embodied recollections of their physical encounters with these objects and the actions that they perform. To be clear, this focus is not about functionality, rather Stephan draws our attention to what transpires through our collaborations with these objects. In this regard, *Paths Rising* offers insight. Installed at the Tampa International Airport, *Paths Rising* features hundreds of wooden ladders that are very similar to the ones you might purchase at your local hardware store. Despite this familiarity, these ladders have lost touch with the ground and appear suspended in a gold-leafed dome (30 feet in diameter) in the ceiling of the airport terminal. Floating in the reflected golden glow of the dome, the wooden ladders remain clearly identifiable as ladders but they simultaneously invoke rays of light reaching down to the viewers below, suggesting a spiritual assumption. Herein lies the perspective that Stephan’s work is conjuring: ladders elevate us up, sometimes to dangerous heights that may be terrifying or awe-inspiring, but in doing so they invite us to embody a new perspective on the world around us. Similarly, *28 Columns* features 28, 8-feet tall, Greek Columns that are cascading into a spin across a span of sixteen feet. Remarkably, the columns, like the concrete blocks in *Murmur,* appear to have been captured in the midst of falling and yet both the columns and the blocks seem to be immune to

[13] Joshua Reiman, “A Conversation with Aaron T Stephan, “Collapsing Structures,” *Sculpture Magazine* July/August 2025: 37.

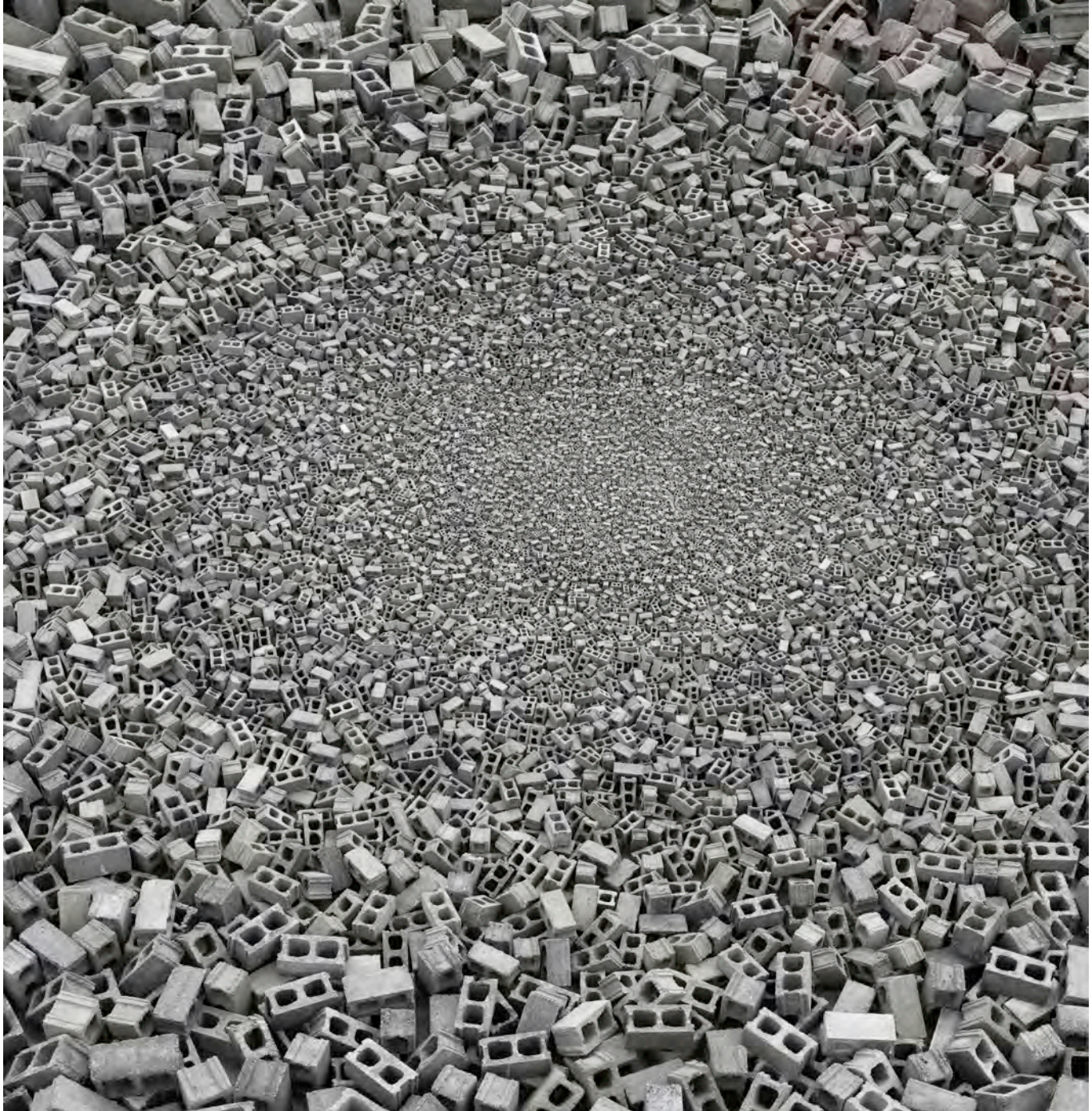
the forces of gravity. These works are not about representing objects, but about opening a space between the object and its worldly function to provide viewers with what might be called a punctal experience.

Roland Barthes introduced the concept of “the punctum” in his book *Camera Lucida*, which was published in 1980, an era when representation was being discussed almost exclusively in terms of semiotics. Barthes introduced the notion of “the Punctum” in an effort to map another register of representation, namely its affective expressions. Barthes’s pursuit of the punctum was an effort to discover how affective impressions stored in viewers’ bodies can be accessed through representations and how these qualities help to shape a viewer’s understanding of an image beyond what the cultural codes of the image might convey. Effectively, the punctum conjoins two portions of experience: one that appears through representation and the other unfolds in the body of a viewer as a “temporal hallucination.”[14] According to Barthes, this hallucination is directly related to a past experience that is not depicted in the representation but which has left an impression on the viewer’s body, one that often remains dormant until something activates it. Ultimately, for Barthes the power of photography lies in its ability to authenticate a first-hand experience. Likewise, Stephan’s work is about activating temporal hallucinations in the viewer to authenticate their affective experiences of the world.

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[14] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980) 55.





The Extraordinary Achievement of the Confounding

John R. Coleman

Aaron T Stephan is the Dr. Doolittle of the material world: he can communicate with the inert substrate of the artist. I have known him for decades, and I've seen him in every kind of battle with the impossible. I've wandered into his studio unannounced—dust in the air, concrete stains on the floor, steel bars leaning precariously in the corners—and there he is, locked in mortal combat with some structure that shouldn't exist, some arrangement of matter that defies sense. More than once I've thought, *this can't stand; it's going to collapse at any second*. And then it doesn't. Instead, it holds as if suspended by some invisible pact between gravity and trust. His studio feels like the site of accidents that never quite happen, like a magician's den where tricks are performed not with sleight of hand but with brute persistence and faith in materials.

What amazes me most is not just what he builds, but how he builds it. Aaron listens. He listens to wood creak, to plaster sigh, to steel resist, and somehow he hears what they want. It's not a myth I'm spinning when I say this; it's what I've seen over and over. He doesn't force materials into submission. He invites them. He is patient. He tells them the truth, and they tell him how far they are willing to go. This pact—the trust between a man and matter—is what allows him to make things most of us would never try.

Aaron is one of the rare artists who feels both ancient and utterly contemporary. He reminds me of the anonymous stonemasons who stacked blocks into cathedrals they would never live to see finished, as well as the conceptual skeptics of today who poke fun at the idea that anything could be permanent. He is reverent and irreverent in equal measure. He can cradle plaster like a child and mock it like a prankster. That balance, that oscillation, gives his work its edge: it is tender, it is absurd, it is monumental, it is sly.

On the surface Aaron can appear gruff, a man of few words. He wears his exterior like armor, not unfriendly but firm, as though to ward off the casual or the shallow. But stay close, and you'll see how quickly that shell cracks. He laughs easily. He cares deeply. He is generous to his friends and his community in ways that go unseen because he does not advertise them. He challenges the world's injustices, not with proclamations of answers but with the insistence that the questions be faced. He is, in short, someone you can trust—not only with a steel beam, but with a confidence.

Part of what makes him trustworthy, I think, is his courage. He takes on projects that border on the absurd. Where others hesitate, calculating the labor, the logistics, the chance of collapse, Aaron dives in. He courts impossibility, even seems to relish it. I've shaken my head at him more times than I can count, muttering *he's out of his mind.* And maybe he is. But it is this foolish bravery that makes the impossible visible. Without it, there would be no towers straining toward heaven, no labyrinths of concrete that fold endlessly into themselves, no works that stop us cold in awe.

And then there is his humor. Aaron's work always carries a wink, though sometimes it is so subtle you don't notice until much later. It might be a sly rearrangement, an absurd redundancy, a structure that parodies itself. He doesn't go in for cheap jokes or heavy-handed irony. His humor is quieter, more dangerous—it sneaks up on you, slows you down, makes you tilt your head. It whispers *you think you understand, but do you?* That whisper is an invitation and, if you accept it, you often find yourself somewhere you didn't expect: laughing at yourself, bewildered, maybe even a little lighter.

Of course, all of this—the fearlessness, the humor, the tenderness—would not matter without the craft. And Aaron's craft is astonishing. He has that rare ability to make difficult things look effortless. He can coax steel to bend like seaweed in the tide. He can make concrete bloom with the fragility of petals. Even his technical drawings, which appear to be photographic transfers, are revealed on closer inspection to be painstakingly hand-rendered, each line pulled patiently into place. There is nothing casual about this. It is devotion, discipline, obsession—and yet the result never feels forced. It flows with the naturalness of something that had always meant to exist.

Surprisingly, I find a performative nature running through Aaron's work. His sculptures are not silent objects so much as formidable gestures—graceful offerings extended toward the audience, as if they are following a script he has written with immense care. He never forgets that people will become the companions to his work. That awareness shapes him and his practice. Where some artists make work for themselves and leave the audience as an afterthought, Aaron makes work that meets the world halfway. He considers not just the thing itself, but the way a person will stand before it, move around it, be altered by it. There is tenderness in that consideration, a kind of hospitality embedded in the making.

One of the most meaningful early experiences I had with Aaron was at his home, at one of the performance dinners he and his wife, acclaimed artist Lauren Fensterstock, were hosting. It was no ordinary meal. It was a staged evening, a careful orchestration of food and art and debate. Each course carried a concept, its presentation inspired by Marcel Duchamp or Joseph Beuys, and threaded through it all was a playful argument: who was the more influential artist? At some point in the night, we were asked to choose sides. The meal itself was exquisite—crafted with the same meticulous attention he gives to steel and plaster—but more than that, it was transformative. The props, the dishes, the flow of the evening pulled us into another realm, where eating became discourse, where dinner became performance, where conversation turned to exploration. I had never had a more beautiful meal.

Aaron the artist cannot be separated from Aaron the man, nor from Aaron the partner. His marriage to Lauren is itself a kind of artwork—two forces balancing, contrasting, reinforcing each other. Lauren is exuberant, verbal, fascinated by the arcane and the mystical. Aaron is quiet, rooted, content to dwell in the moment. Together they form a confluence, like two rivers meeting. Their love is not a backdrop to their work but its foundation. You can feel it in the trust that underpins everything they make, in the generosity that seeps out of their collaborations. They have something rare and special: a life of shared devotion to creation, to art, and to each other.

Later, when our friendship deepened, I invited Aaron to participate in artist gatherings I organized called *Curings*. Each participant was given a chance to curate fifteen minutes to do whatever they wished, while the rest of us bore witness with noble attention. Aaron's contributions were always unexpected, always theatrical in their own sly way. I remember one in particular: he took a simple, flat-packed dining chair, ordered straight from Ikea, and began to assemble it step by step. We all watched in silence as he followed the banal instructions, tightening screws, fitting parts together. The air was steady, domestic, almost dull. And then, once the chair stood completed before us, he reached for a sledgehammer and smashed it to pieces. The shift was shocking—the slow build of construction followed by the violent climax of destruction. It was absurd, funny, tragic, and oddly beautiful all at once. It felt like a fifteen minute opera. That is how I often feel when I experience Aaron's work: as though it carries the rhythm of performance, the rise and fall of tension, the unexpected climax, the quiet aftermath. His sculptures may be still, but they breathe with drama. They gesture to us, invite us in, build us up, and sometimes shatter us. They are often worth, I think, a curtain call.

All of these strands—his pact with materials, his gruff tenderness, his courage, his wit, his craft, his love, his place—come together in *Murmur*. I first encountered it with my wife, walking into a hall at Thompson's Point. The entryway held a scattering of Aaron's other works—monuments, models, drawings, block studies. It felt like a warm-up, a reminder of his restless experimentation. And then we stepped into the square field of *Murmur*.

It stopped us. A vast field of concrete blocks stretched before us, and we went silent without even deciding to. Walking its perimeter felt less like observing art than like entering a ritual. The repetition of blocks, the folding inward of the pattern, the endlessness contained within a few feet beyond reach—it was dizzying, confounding, strangely holy.

Murmur is simple, and at the same time it is not simple. On one level, it is nothing more than blocks stacked on blocks, the same material that builds our houses and highways, our schools and prisons. Concrete: the gray currency of construction, the promise of shelter, the weight of labor, the machinery of capitalism. But in Aaron's hands, these blocks begin to speak. They ask: is this endless repetition a path toward liberation, a meditation? Or is it oppression, the ceaseless grind of dehumanizing labor? Is this structure real or a hallucination? Is it infinite or a trick of perspective?

The piece is visually confusing, in the best way. It folds in on itself, endless yet bounded, vast yet just beyond reach. It disorients gently, loosening our grip on certainty. As I once heard the Buddhist teacher Joseph Goldstein say of life: it's real, but not really real. When one is in this liminal space of understanding, I believe true insights can arise and *Murmur* conjures this experience.

Aaron and I share a deep admiration for the work of Marcel Duchamp. When you stand before *Murmur*, the spirit of the readymade hovers unmistakably. Concrete blocks, nothing more. A stylized pile of them. The most ordinary of manufactured objects suddenly charged with the weight of art, as if Duchamp himself had whispered permission. But the longer you stay, the more you feel Aaron's hand in every grain of sand. What at first seems anonymous, industrial, generic, reveals itself as intimate, particular, painstaking. Can an artist be painterly with concrete? Evidently, yes.

Aaron's relationship to the cinder block is not casual. He researched its history, dug into its lineage as a humble building material, but he also learned its secrets the only way that matters: by making them, again and again. I once saw the collection of forms he built to cast each differently sized block. They looked less like tools of production and more like modernist sculptures themselves—clean, strong, elegant, objects with their own strange beauty. Like a chemist, he experimented endlessly with the mixture: adjusting formulas, altering textures, chasing the perfect shade of gray, the perfect surface, the perfect weight. But like an artist, he did all this not by textbook but by intuition, by a kind of sixth sense that told him when it was right.

This is something essential about Aaron: he does not approach construction like a traditional craftsperson following inherited rules. He approaches it like an artist. He is restless, inventive, unafraid to wander off the prescribed path. And so the unimaginable hours spent casting block after block, hauling them, arranging them, disassembling them, storing them, repeating the cycle—all of it was not the labor of a worker grinding through production. It was the immersion of an artist in the zone of creation. *Murmur* is not a pile of blocks, it is a portrait. It whispers: *I am Aaron T Stephan, and Aaron T Stephan is me.*

The piece offers no answers. It insists on the question. And in doing so, it disorients us just enough that we begin to notice things we usually ignore: the texture of the blocks, the rhythm of their arrangement, the echo of our footsteps as we circle them. We begin to hear, faintly, a heartbeat—the memory of Stephan's labor. That heartbeat is what makes *Murmur* more than blocks. It is an offering. His labor becomes our invitation to slow down, to breathe, to listen.

It is rare for a work of art to truly dumbfound me. But *Murmur* did. It gave no comfort, no explanation, no false reassurance. After years of pandemic isolation, it did not say "everything will be alright." Instead, it whispered something quieter, deeper, more honest. And maybe that is the true gift of Aaron T Stephan's work. Not comfort, not clarity, but bewilderment. He builds the confounding and asks us to live in it. He teaches us that to stand dumbfounded—uncertain, laughing, silenced, in awe—is not a failure of understanding but a deeper way of being awake.



Regarding Perception and the Unreachable

Iris Williamson

Aaron T Stephan's work investigates the interplay between existing objects and structures in our environment, their impact on the human body, and the social and symbolic relationships they engender. By mining the invisible histories of design, materials, and labor, the artist creates large-scale sculptures, installations, and public art that question the relationships people have with their surroundings. In *Murmur*, Stephan presents a singular gesture in 5000+ pieces—one that plays with perception, access, and power.

Murmur begins with an exploration of a specific material and form—the concrete block—and its connection to regional industrial histories and foundational ideologies of American ingenuity. In the late 19th century, new developments in reinforced concrete and steel led to the rise of skyscrapers and improved infrastructure, and, subsequently, the introduction of concrete blocks made large-scale growth more accessible to small businesses and homeowners. The invention of the block-making machine–such as Sears, Roebuck and Co.'s popular model, the "Wizard," which inspired Stephan's research and production strategies--made materials more affordable for

everyday Americans and added to the allure of self-sufficiency. Designed for use in the catalogue company's mail-order home building kits, consumers could use the Wizard to produce up to one concrete block every two minutes. Stephan harnesses a nostalgic sense of American ingenuity by designing his own suite of Wizards, each modeled on a run-of-the-mill construction-grade item you could buy at your neighborhood hardware store. The key variation is the scale: the blocks produced in Stephan's Wizards go from being slightly larger than usual and gradually decrease in size until they measure about an inch long. Over the course of four years, Stephan has used these machines to produce thousands of blocks of varying sizes. Through this process, he embodies the invisible labor of the material we encounter in everyday life while also unpacking the embedded assumptions that, by working hard, *anyone* could build a desirable life.

Murmur is, most simply, thousands of concrete blocks laid out in an ample interior space to resemble the expanse of a large field. Stephan meticulously arranges these blocks across the floor to create a dense surface with them leaning and resting on one another, forming a large "plot of land." He has the slightly larger-than-normal blocks positioned along the edges of the installation, with the sizes diminishing gradually to miniature blocks as they approach the center. While the installation mimics a field of stones, it is not possible to walk across the jagged expanse to closely investigate the piece's individual qualities. The work is accessed via a pathway along the field's perimeter, placing the body between the building's walls and the most substantial blocks of *Murmur*. The tiny blocks are in the distance and beg a closer examination, yet they are completely inaccessible as they almost disappear into a vortex. This work relies on the viewer's physical sensations and shifting perceptions as they walk through the space. There is a longing for something out of reach—an urge to move closer and engage with the work—yet a denial of access to it. Robert Smithson noted this irresolute and utopian longing for the unattainable: "One is always crossing the horizon, yet it always remains distant. In this line where sky meets earth, objects cease to

exist.” *Murmur* operates like the horizon, engaging that dream to reach a desired destination or, in this case, return to a nostalgic place where home ownership is broadly attainable.

The site-specific nature of Stephan's *Murmur* is a significant aspect of the work, as it affects both the body and the histories and contexts in which it exists. Before the exhibition at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, the artist installed the piece in a reclaimed industrial space that was originally a site for shipping and railroad industries in Maine. The industrial symbolism embedded within both the building and the materials used in the artwork is somewhat of the same world: the cement blocks and the bricks that hold up the warehouse have related histories, yet do different work. Labor is made visible in both the construction of the building and the industry that existed here, directly connecting with the time and effort that Stephan put into building each block. In addition, the mechanical developments that were happening concurrently have a similar connection to the promise of industrialization that drew Stephan initially to the Wizard and the idea of mail-order homes. The artist is playing with multilayered relationships between material, history, and place, linking the installation to Maine's local history and to a broader industrial heritage in the Northeastern United States.

As the piece transitions from a warehouse to a *center for contemporary art*, the industrial connection hides behind drywall (yet remains, nodding to Rockland’s own industrial histories). It is placed squarely within a larger history of modern and contemporary museums and Minimalist sculpture. It specifically brings to mind the later 20th century shift from the “encyclopedic museum […] intent on telling a story” to the impulse for museum spaces to “forego history in the name of a kind of intensity of experience, an aesthetic charge that is not so much temporal (historical) as it is now radically spatial [.]” Rosalind Krauss wrote in depth about the shift from the museum as “a highly individualized artistic epiphany” to viewers encountering “a euphoria of space first, and art second” in her 1990

essay “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum.” Krauss argued that, “a profound encounter with the work of art had become subordinated to a new register of experience: the unanchored hyperreality of its architectural container, which produced effects of disembodiment that, in [her] view, correlated to the dematerialized flows of global capital.” With this framework in mind, *Murmur* exists both within an industrial context and in relationship with the monumental architecture of the “late capitalist museum” that *becomes part of the artwork itself*. The audience's experience is of utmost importance, as space, light, and the viewer’s field of vision shape the work's meaning. We can bring to mind examples of this when thinking about the drawings of artists such as Sol LeWitt that occupy multiple rooms at Mass MOCA, or Dan Flavin’s neon works that change the feeling of a room before you enter it at Dia:Beacon. Thus, the viewer’s *bodily* perception is where the *Murmur* is located, reckoning with the physicality of the objects in the space and the body’s relationship to them.

Giving these industrial, reproducible works so much real estate in a gallery is caught up in the ideological connections between industrial greatness and artistic greatness. Elevating the value of mass-produced materials to the level of a museum asset, “the very choice of materials and shapes ring with the overtones of industry.” Furthermore, reproducibility adds another dimension to the work: the art objects are created from a specific set of plans (in this case, utilizing the Wizard), allowing for potential replication. The gravitation towards mass-produced objects mirrors the scalability of and regard towards material technologies. It suggests that these items, made from readily available materials and easily reproduced from plans, hold high artistic significance. Enough importance is given to the work to merit this much space. However, what could be accessible—concrete blocks to build a home, the idea of the American Dream, the belief that individuals can now achieve successful futures through hard work and determination—often proves to be an illusion.

The monumentality of *Murmur* resonates throughout the expansive space it occupies, creating an immersive experience that engages both the viewer's body and perception. Additionally, the piece explores the region's industrial history, telling stories of exploitation and success that continue into the present. By elevating mass-produced materials to the status of museum-worthy artifacts, artist Aaron T Stephan reminds us that these spaces are not neutral. They are shaped by systems of power. *Murmur* highlights the nostalgic pursuit of the American Dream, where personal success remains desirable yet increasingly out of reach.



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