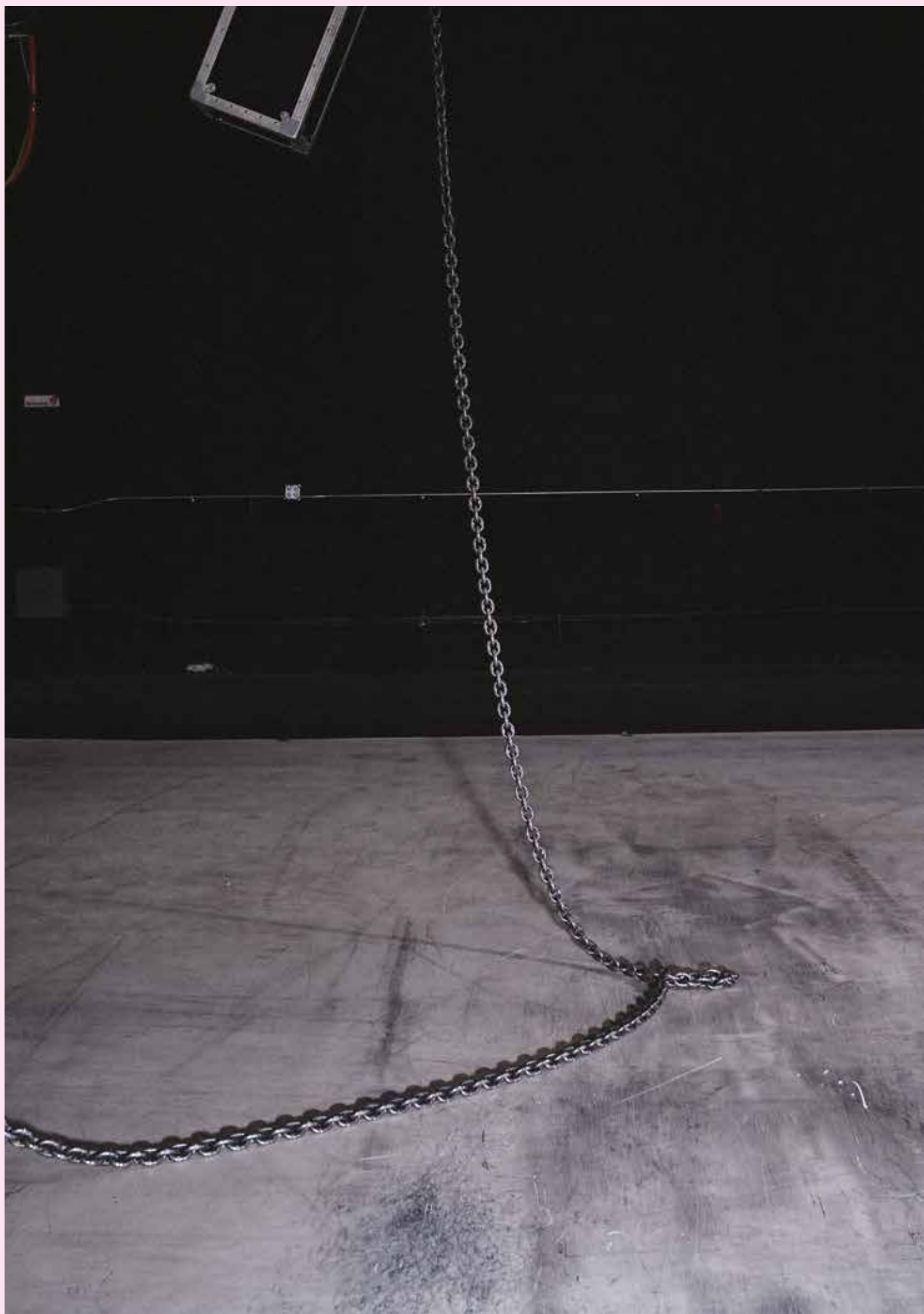
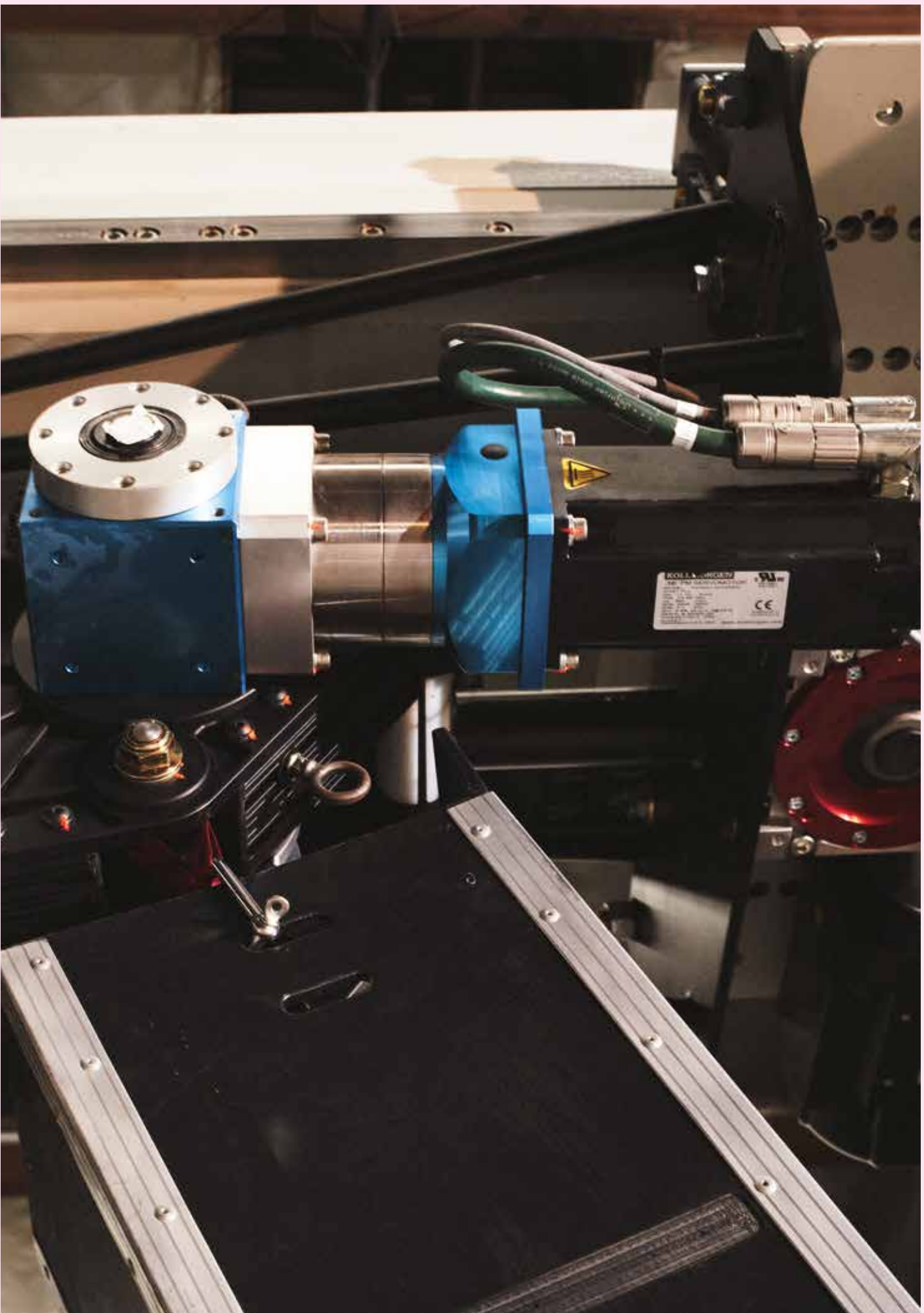
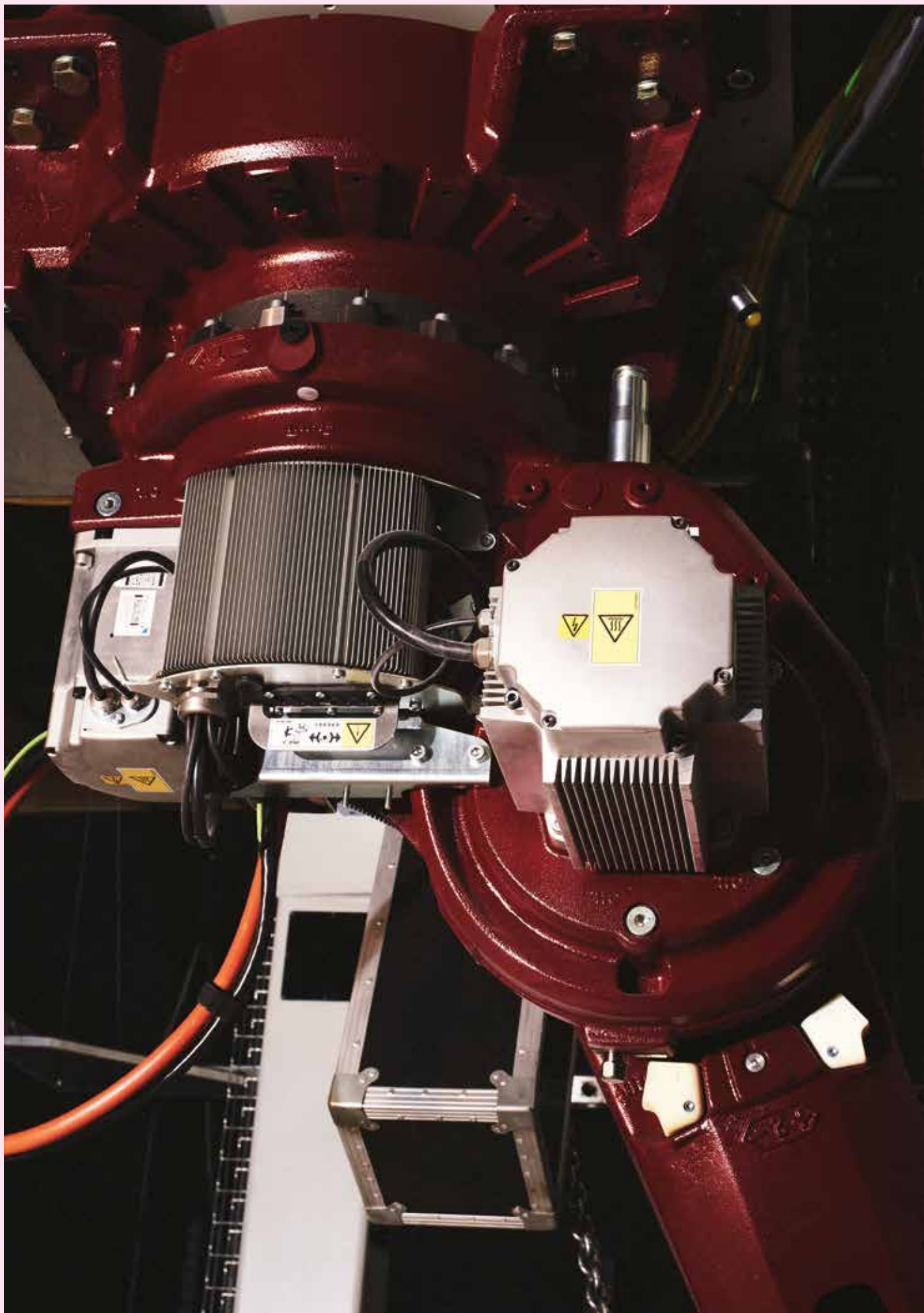


COVER STORY PREMIERE

JORDAN WOLFSON

In conversation with
CAROLINE BUSTA
and LIL INTERNET







CAROLINE BUSTA So Jordan, where are you right now?

JORDAN WOLFSON I'm in my home in L.A. I miss Berlin though. I remember when I moved there in 2004, I was living in Christian Jankowski's apartment on Torstraße. It was really dreamy; rent was like 300 euros a month. Everyone was still coming off the late-90s so all of those ideas, like Relational Aesthetics, were still circulating. You had people becoming artists who maybe wouldn't have become artists otherwise. I loved it. But personally, I could never make art there.

CB Because you needed the pressure of the New York situation? I remember doing a studio visit with you at your place in Red Hook in the late-00s and thinking, "Oh, Jordan is really going for it."

JW Because I'm an American artist, I've always been bad at making work abroad, yeah, I remember that. I made you dinner and showed you *Raspberry Poser*.

CB Exactly. Can you take us back to when you first started getting more public traction?

JW Yeah. Well, I'd been included in the 2006 Whitney Biennial but I was 25 and too young for all of that public exposure. Following the biennial, I was agitated and eventually things got really painful. I was showing with a small gallery uptown that booted me out around 2010 and I knew I had to change things up with my Berlin gallery. Things just weren't working. And then I thought, "Fuck it, I'm going to be the best version of myself and whatever happens, happens and I kind of gave up trying." Then suddenly Sadie Coles cold e-mails me, I speak with her on the phone and she includes me in a group show. David Zwirner is there, he asks me to be in a group show at his gallery with *Raspberry Poser* but I would have to take down my piece early because Raymond Pettibon needed the space in advance to finish work for his own exhibition. I thought there was no way David Zwirner was going to represent me, so I said I didn't want to take part in the group show because I had to take my piece down early. But I said, "If you wanted to do a non-committed solo show with me — and I literally wrote, *you don't have to represent me* — I'd do that." I immediately got an e-mail back, "No, we *are* interested in representing you." So suddenly, David was my art dealer.

CB Despite having such solid representation, you've been repeatedly called out for the portrayal of violence and other difficult themes in your work. This is interesting given that we live in a time when representations of violence are everywhere, especially online but also in the art world — for instance, the 2022 Berlin Biennale could have been dubbed the "pain biennale" for the amount of trauma it put on view. What do you think it is about how violence appears in your work that compels people to call it "problematic"?

JW I think it has less to do with my art and more to do with the expectations and the boundaries the viewer has around art. I have a young nephew who plays first-person shooter video games far more violent than anything I've ever made, and he's playing them with other kids and adults all around the world. Meanwhile, people expect museums to reaffirm their moral beliefs. You know, there are certain things in other artists' work that I find highly negative. My art work didn't come at the expense of the life of anyone. I built a robot, I hired an actor and I put a face on him. However, we were able to trigger a hyper-vigilant reaction in the viewer. So in a way, that piece was in fact an attack on the viewer's nervous system. I made the piece because I noticed my own nervous system having this primitive physical reaction to content — specifically, the ISIS beheading videos — and I was shocked at both how unreal these videos seemed and how strong my visceral response to them was.

CB When it comes to engaging intense emotions, what art historical figures do you feel you're in dialogue with?

JW I like Caravaggio very much.



CB When I think of Caravaggio — of course, it's because of his lighting — there's something incredibly cinematic in his work. Do you see your practice in a cinematic frame?

JW Do you really think Caravaggio even imagined cinema would have ever existed?

CB I do, yes, in the sense that he could imagine crowds seeing his work and, at the time, large paintings served a very similar function in their capacity as spectacle. I'm just curious to know how you feel your work relates to the cinematic. Also, you're working with professionals who work in Hollywood...

JW But I'm getting them to do things that they wouldn't normally be asked to do. I really like cinema but like Buñuel, Bergman...

CB Yes, it makes sense... Bergman's captivating uses of faces resonates with the way you use machine learning to find the eyes of the viewer. I just had a baby and certainly the most exciting thing about a six-week-old is that they start looking you in the eye for sustained periods of time. You literally witness them coming into consciousness.

JW What's it like to feel that your child is conscious?

LIL INTERNET It's wild. The prison of feeling like maybe you're the only subjective presence on the planet is suddenly challenged. It totally breaks down once you have a child.

JW When you watch animals express emotions — like, watching your cat express shame — you realize the boundary of consciousness isn't even that of the human body. This is what I attempt in my artworks — to facilitate the viewer witness consciousness outside of their own body.

LI I've read interviews where you've said you want the viewer to temporarily feel what it's like to be placed in a part of your consciousness.

JW Sometimes people get angry that I say this. But it's not meant to be arrogant. For example, when you look at an artwork by Isa Genzken you're getting the opportunity to see like Isa Genzken for that moment, or when you look at a work by Martin Kippenberger, you're getting the opportunity to see with Kippenberger's aggressive insanity. And so with my work or any other artist's, you get to see the way we see.

CB Can you tell us about your new work *Body Sculpture*, that you'll be unveiling at the National Gallery of Australia in November?

JW It's my third animatronic sculpture. It's about the body and sculpture.

CB When *Body Sculpture* is installed in Australia, how long will its performance be?

JW 35 minutes.

CB What was your process of creating the work's choreography?

JW It took a long time and a lot of trial and error because the formal foundation of the work wasn't eye contact like the last two pieces. I worked with several professionals in dance and also circus. Part of me wanted to simply rely on them but couldn't because their values weren't the same and in a way each one of them was too talented. My central collaborator on this work and the past two has been Mark Setrakian, and together we carved out the movements.

CB So essentially this work is a pair of robotic hands attached to a cube that is suspended from a metal chain that's directed by a robotic track. Maybe it's too literal of a reading, but I can't help but think about AI and people's fears of a quantitative future, one where a cube programmed by zeros and ones becomes anthropomorphic...

JW A lot of people are having the AI reading although that was not the genesis for me. It was really about personification and reification.

LI Do you believe in panpsychism? The idea that everything in the universe has some degree of consciousness just on different levels?

JW Yes, totally. In his book *Truth vs. Falsehood* (2021), David R. Hawkins says that the consciousness of a dog is particularly high because it has the frequency of love. Then he also rates all of these individual people: Truman Capote had a 200 in consciousness, Walt Whitman was 460, Mark Twain was 465...



LI Has your relationship to technology, the internet, etc. changed since you first were doing work rooted in memes or internet culture?

JW I'm less interested in the internet now. I have a guy in his 30s at my studio who's aware of everything and we talk about these themes every day. But I stopped reading the news three years ago.

CB Well, the news stopped being the news some time around then.

LI I wonder why and how you got into robotics.

JW I think it's because of my interest in movement. I never thought I'd make a "robot" but then I saw this animatronic at Epcot Center and it had this amazing hand movement and I felt a huge rush in me, and I became obsessed with importing this type of "real life" or "in person movement" into my work. Video art suddenly seemed really flat and just not enough anymore. It was one of those instant life-changing moments. I realized that I could use my skills as a video artist to make a sculpture that moved because it would exist chronologically, same as the edit of a video, so the conditions of stillness that sculpture usually had wouldn't matter.

LI Do you ever feel like a robot? Or do you ever have a little bit of dissociation, as if you're piloting a body?

JW No.

CB When your art appears conscious, is that a mark of success for you?

JW Yes, but that's just the primary layer. The work ultimately needs to draw the viewer back into their own physicality.

CB Robert Morris would probably say the same thing. His mirrored cubes suggested that sculpture could function only insofar as it served as a proxy or an awareness-generator for the viewer's own body.

JW That's exactly how I feel. I had that experience in Florence, looking at Michelangelo's *David*. At a certain point, I realized that all the people in the room had been there together for maybe 40 minutes — 40 minutes of looking at a still object collectively, all of us, potentially having this aesthetic experience.

LI I remember you talked about Michelangelo in your 2021 conversation with Bleep on the Zwirner podcast. Listening now, I can't believe that conversation happened — a blue-chip Zwirner artist speaking to an NFT guy about what art is and what's good art.

JW I got offered so many times to make an NFT. It appeared to me just a scheme to create value for crypto.

LI Why do you think so many people — even art-world people who should have known better — went along with it all?

CB I want to add some nuance here. A valid use case for NFTs has always been as an "investment in a future that you wanted to see happen." You'd buy an NFT, there'd be some visual component that resonated for you on a vibe level that suggested the mood of the future (or sometimes also a particular future function) that you wanted to endorse. Art works that way, too. If you collect somebody's art, you're endorsing a discourse. You're saying, "I'm interested in this person's vision, the kind of debate they're putting out there." So there's a conceptual correlation between aesthetics and ideas. But in the case of, say, Bleep, was the future he was drawing one that anybody actually wanted? Was it aesthetically challenging or just blatantly "mid" (and therefore market-compatible)? If so, then the question is really why did people believe in the aesthetic component that was native to the NFT market, this cliché graphic design, vaporware style? It's not even outsider art with some degree of lore...

JW Well, I didn't believe in it. When I saw other artists doing NFTs, I was sympathetic to it, but it also looked like a contrived money grab.

LI How did your conversation with Bleep come about? It's interesting that you were invited to be his interlocutor.

JW It wasn't my idea. David and Lucas Zwirner asked me to talk to him. My initial response was no, but then I decided to try. But ultimately, I found the NFT craze boring...

CB It's also because nearly all NFTs present an image without any political or aesthetic tension. So they can only be a reflection of their market function, and is that "art"?



JW I don't know but people have a sycophantic relationship with money and for individuals who receive excessive attention. I went to dinner on Friday and I got into an argument about a Gen-Z pop singer's music, who, in my opinion, is the worst of culture. And I think that the NFT craze was the worst of culture too. Because it's popular and selling doesn't make it important... other than being important to someone, or being important tribally, which has its own value but more as a kind of headline.

CB Well, the 20th-century commodity object form of culture has disintegrated, which means the economy around culture is currently in disarray.

JW I don't know if you've ever been around someone super famous. People have a very primitive reaction to celebrities.

CB Do you think the art world celebrates celebrity or maybe even the sociopathy that enables some forms of celebrity? Celebrity as something that underpins value in art?

JW I believe I've met some sociopaths but they are business people — people able to structure businesses in certain advantageous ways through a kind of narcissistic dissociation. But the idea of a sociopath? I don't believe that the art world celebrates that, no... but in general the world at large tends to celebrate narcissists who are able to craft very precise and compelling images of themselves.

LI It's more like there's maybe a bit of a sado/masochistic game in the art world where they like to have monsters.

CB Right, like Merlin Carpenter or Yves Klein or Bjarne Melgaard compromising their gallerists and collectors through difficult content and extreme demands yet at the same time, through this, reinforcing the trust that holds a scene together and therefore the value of the art that scene endorses.

JW Yeah, it's good to take the jester and make them the demon. The problem with the sociopath myth is that it gives someone permission to see someone who's challenging and to say, "Oh, I could never be like that person; that person must be bad." It allows someone to have a separatist reaction to things they don't like or understand.

LI Really simple question, what drives you?

JW I've been fortunate to have these really big, private experiences with artworks. And I just want to recreate those for myself and for other people.

CB Are there any works that you regret making?

JW No, not really.

LI Or anything about an existing work that you would change?

JW I made this artwork called *Perfect Lover* in 2007. It was a CGI talking crow. I wanted the crow to sing the opening song for the television show *M.A.S.H.*, which goes, "Suicide is painless. It brings on many changes, doo doo doo doo doo..." It's a very strange song. I wanted the crow to sing it in the piece but I was too scared and ashamed of my intuition and instead had the crow counting: one o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock, four o'clock.

LI What is it about suicide, because that also plays into a key gesture in *Body Sculpture*? The hara-kiri pose...

JW I'm not going to go too much into it, because that's personal but I remember talking to my psychiatrist about suicide and it was interesting to me, he said it's an evolutionary mechanism.

LI In the way that it's almost a mechanical function? Is it just code? Like a script that humans run when faced with certain conditions?

JW Yes, like a program that's executed if you are in a particular situation or chemical state.

LI In the piece, it's the moments of self-destruction where I most anthropomorphize the sculpture. Like suicide does not seem animalistic, but perversely, tragically human.

CB By pointing toward suicide, does *Body Sculpture* go a step further than *Colored sculpture*, giving the work a kind



of agency that you'd argue is particularly human?

JW I don't know.

LI Do you deliberately leverage "problematic" subject matter knowing that it's more likely to circulate?

JW No. I'm making what I feel and believe is interesting art, I don't believe that addressing challenging content is problematic. Had my artwork been in the form of literature instead, I think the subject matter would have been deemed "interesting" or "constructive." But because I'm making it as an artwork, people say that Jordan's saying something literally, directly about himself and his values rather than exploring the shadows.

LI I think people are probably responding to the scale, production value, and cost of your work dealing with the shadows, as you call it. Like if something occult happens outside of the mainstream it's fine, but when something in the shadows gets major institutional funding, people start publicly combating it — in part because it increases the critics' own visibility to do so.

JW I really don't like arguing this point. I believe that artists should make whatever they want...

LI To be clear, I don't want to argue this either; I'm just curious how you think about it.

JW I try not to think about it. My most important job is to make art and tell the truth.

CB Going back to consciousness, do you think that true machine-generated consciousness is something that we'll have to deal with in the future?

JW Yes.

LI Do you think people are increasingly detached from reality?

JW I think the human condition is one looping self involved acid trip.

LI OK, last question. Imagine you're hiking alone on a difficult and dangerous trail somewhere very remote. And you encounter another "you," exactly another copy of Jordan Wolfson on that trail. What would you do?

JW I would probably look at him very closely and see if there were any defects in his duplication...

LI But you find none. This double has the same experiences, same brain. Would you feel threatened? Do you team up and go through life together? Or what would he do to you?

JW I'm not going to answer that. But I will tell you I'm making an artwork that's a bit like that, which will come out in 2025. The piece is called *Little Room*.



Image folio, *Body Sculpture* Photo: David Sims, 2023 Post Production: SKN All photos Courtesy: the artist © Jordan Wolfson, 2023 (pp. 232–235, pp. 242–243)

Colored sculpture, installation views, David Zwirner, New York, 2016 Courtesy: the artist, David Zwirner and Sadie Coles HQ, London © Jordan Wolfson (pp. 236–237)

(Female figure), installation view, David Zwirner, New York, 2014 Photo: Jonathan Smith Courtesy: the artist and David Zwirner © Jordan Wolfson (p. 238, top)

Infinite Melancholy, 2003 (still) Courtesy the artist, David Zwirner and Sadie Coles HQ, London © Jordan Wolfson (p. 238, bottom)

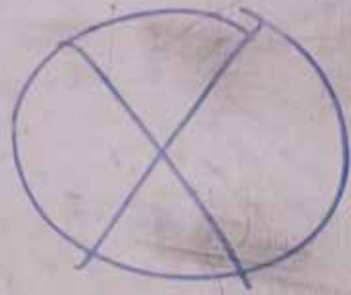
ARTISTS FRIENDS RACISTS, installation view, David Zwirner, Paris, 2020 Courtesy: the artist, David Zwirner and Sadie Coles HQ, London © Jordan Wolfson (p. 239, top)

Raspberry Poser, installation view, David Zwirner, New York, 2014 Photo: Jonathan Smith Courtesy: the artist, David Zwirner and Sadie Coles HQ, London © Jordan Wolfson (p. 239, bottom)

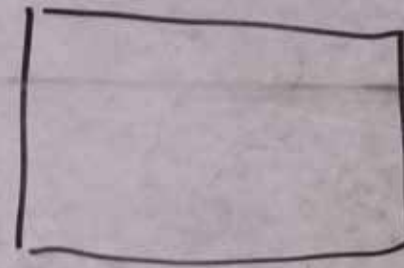
Untitled, 2021 Courtesy: the artist, David Zwirner and Sadie Coles HQ, London © Jordan Wolfson (p. 240, top)

Real violence, 2017, installation view, Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2017 Photo: Bill Orcutt Collection of the artist Courtesy: the artist, David Zwirner and Sadie Coles HQ, London (p. 240, bottom)

Animation, masks, 2011 (still detail) Courtesy: the artist, David Zwirner and Sadie Coles HQ, London © Jordan Wolfson (p. 241)



SCULPTURE
HAND
POSE



SUICIDE
END