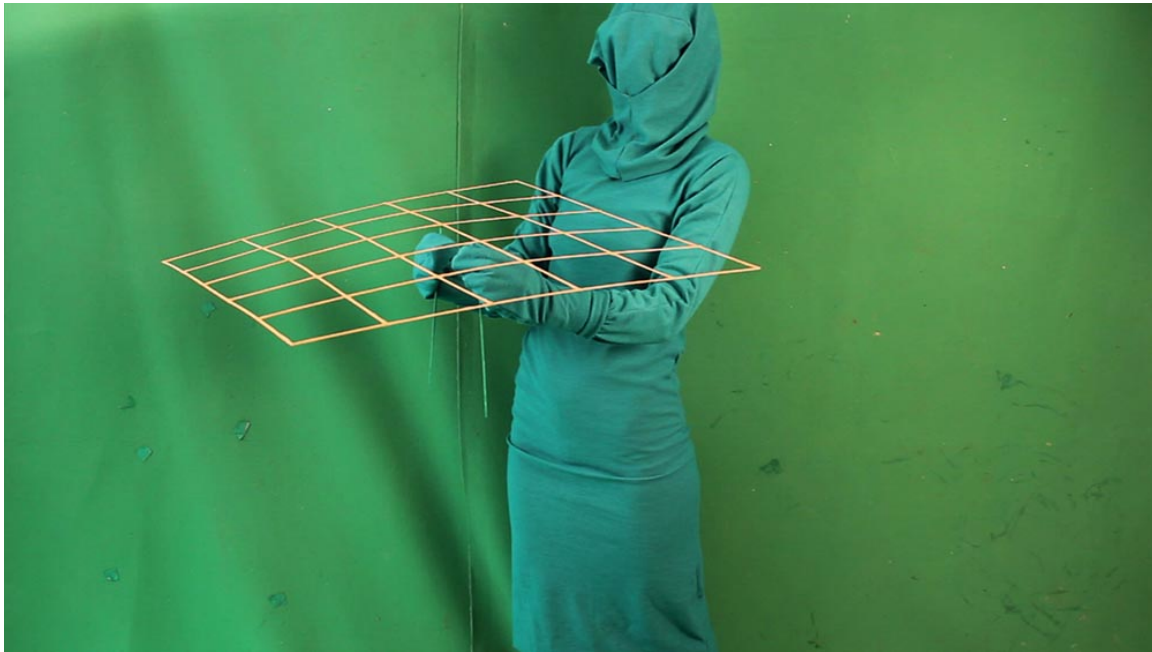


**BOMB**

Alina Tenser  
by Rachel Valinsky

*"Oh, obviously my leg sticking out from underneath the tray needs to stay."*



Alina Tenser. Video still (without chroma-key effect) from *Locating Catch and Shake*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

"Narrative is pattern and transformation." I was standing in front of Alina Tenser's video, *Necklace*, as she walked me and a handful of others around "No Entrance, No Exit," her recent three-person exhibition at The Kitchen, in New York. This piece, installed in the entrance to the gallery, was my introduction to the New York-based artist's work, which rather than negate access (or departure), complicates and multiplies points of entry, positioning the surface of the image as one of many contiguous and coexisting structures. In her videos, decontextualized objects—which are cast against uniformly-colored backgrounds or patterned, material supports—both initiate changes in shape and activity and are acted upon to transform. Though not always revealed, her body is never far off.

Tenser carries with her an ever expanding repertoire of gestures, including hovering, rolling, gliding, stretching, climbing, balancing, and simply staying still. These gestures, which are at times choreographed and at other times more incidental, have developed in relation to her body, as have the proportions of the performance objects and environments she creates for them. The qualities of these objects determine their use, often going against a prescribed function in favor of affective, aesthetic, and intuitive use. Objects and bodies pass fluidly across planes even as Tenser moves between sculpture, video, and performance, redefining what might constitute, today, new ways to approach the overlapping qualities of these practices.

I sat down with Tenser recently at her studio, where we talked about object-making, public and private lives, and motherhood.

**Rachel Valinsky** I'm curious about how, or at what point, you might have moved from sculpture to making objects for videos, or rather how a new kind of object came out of thinking about making videos.

**Alina Tenser** Actually, the first video that I made, *Relief I*, had only one object made for it. It was the first of its kind for me. I basically made kind of a blobby thing that had certain bodily requirements, measurement-wise. I wanted it to have a specific width that would be the width of a familiar man's shoulders. And I wanted there to be creases that would be like creases on an ear, but oversized. I also wanted there to be certain types of knobs. Basically, these were all things that I wanted to touch and describe with my hands. I very much thought of that video as an object, dealing with form, volume, and dimension, very sculpturally. I missed objects. (*laughter*) I was very surprised to find out how much they really show what happens to a form once it changes dimension. It's been surprising me ever since 2012, when I started working that way. I had a wonderful moment when making a video called *Pong With Herself*, where I was working with a bowl shape that I had painted green screen on the outside and kind of a yolk color on the inside, because I wanted to see what an inside looks like without its holder. On screen, it actually goes from concave to convex. So, an innie is also an outie, and vice versa. That's a very interesting sculptural moment.

**RV** When you're using green screen to describe an object or set of objects, your body is obviously interacting with them—and some of them are made specifically to be extensions or duplicates of the body, or objects that the body can work with, somehow. I'm curious how this activity grows out of your interactions with objects in the world, and how that then gets translated into working with them in your videos.



**AT** Well, some of the objects are made, and some of them are bought. Most often it's a combination of the two. And sometimes, I'll really just have a question in my mind, like: "What does this look like in video?" And sometimes it comes from making a tool I'll be using in a video—a tool that's meant to be green screened—and then finding its utility somehow really unique,

basically. This can play into the video, or perhaps evolve back into a sculpture that I would show on its own. For example, I was making a video with this tray that had ridges in it, and I wanted to roll objects across the surface of the tray, so that they had an equal stutter or bounce to them. The objects kept getting stuck on the ridges, so I finally stretched a piece of fabric over the tray and was really amazed at the surface that came from that. I started pulling that surface into my sculptures. And then some of the objects I've bought are reinterpreted, like the furniture gliders, or paint rollers. They're the kinds of things I'll buy and just look at for a while. The rollers were an immediate thing. I saw them and knew they had to be brought into that piece. But I probably had the furniture gliders in my studio for half a year. I gravitated toward them because of their odd array of colors: a rainbow of beige.

**RV** They're very neutral in a way, and they certainly don't really describe their use. They're just shiny, beige objects.

**AT** Exactly. They're strangely shiny. They kind of have great shapes.

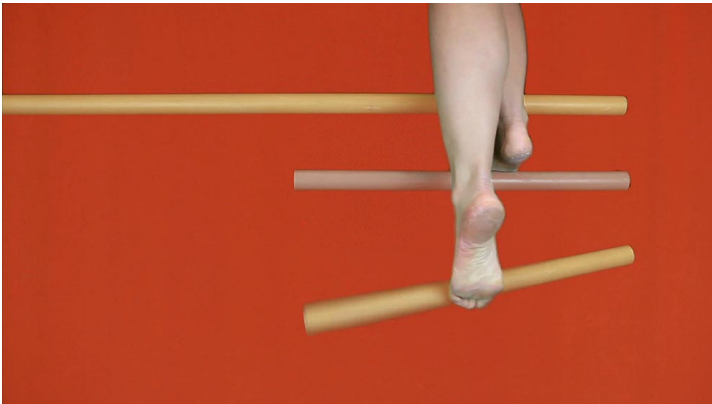
**RV** They have an amazing name, too: gliders.

**AT** They have an amazing name, exactly. I feel like I could just keep thinking about *what* they could possibly do.

**RV** (*laughter*)

**AT** I would think of them as a kind of hover. But of course they're actually designed and manufactured in a way that doesn't allow much room for non-directive use. They have a purpose. I really like playing with that—designating a different role for them. And I've also had that experience trying to do that with other things, and they just don't get out of their purpose.

**RV** What would be an object that's too rigid in its purpose?



**AT** Well, I don't know if it's too rigid. Perhaps I just haven't found a way to do it yet. Like the toe-separating sponges used for pedicures. (*laughter*) I tried and failed. Yeah... marker holders, maybe? I don't know. Sharpie holders? (*laughter*)

**RV** We were just talking about trays, and you were mentioning how trays are objects that you've both used as sculpture, but that

they're also important in your videos, in a functional way. Can you talk a little bit more about how you got started with them?

**AT** Initially, I started making trays because they're just very handy, whether I'm rolling objects around or dropping them off the edges. They became a really comfortable container. Something I did early on in video was make a bucket shape, with the outside, again, painted green screen and the inside a yolk yellow. Shortly after that, I wanted to see what different volumes would look like when revealed in video—with just the inside revealed—so I guess that's how I came to trays. Then they started appearing in my sculptures, because I got fascinated with their form. They just barely make it out of being a plane into being a volume. As far as all the vessels go, they're quite useless. Or perhaps, this is a funny video for someone else to make, of carrying water in a tray.

**RV** (*laughter*)

**AT** Watering plants with a tray. I don't know.

**RV** But they're useful in terms of a domestic use, right?

**AT** Yeah, in terms of presentation, or perhaps organization, but they're definitely a short distance—domestic distance—kind of vessel. I also really like that they fully reveal their volume. They're just a complete orifice.

**RV** ... from which nothing can hide.

**AT** Right. No mold is growing in there from, like, months back.

**RV** When the item goes from a regular everyday thing to becoming a performance object, it seems to undergo a transformation, not just in its use but also aesthetically. Like the furniture gliders; you altered them ever so slightly.

**AT** Yeah, I sandwiched them together with caulking, so they have an Oreo or giant pill look. For some reason, that slight process of doubling them up really takes them out of their furniture glider role. They just become... gliders... at that point.

**RV** The platonic glider. (*laughter*)

**AT** (*laughter*) Yeah, like the platonic glider. Exactly. They can no longer support—

**RV** They don't fulfill their function.

**AT** Right.

**RV** The gliders were prominent components of the sculptures you had up in "No Entrance, No Exit" at The Kitchen this past year. Have you used them elsewhere?

**AT** Yeah, in a video called *Glider Shuffle*, and in a performance called *Vegetable, Be Soap!*



**RV** Was that your first live performance?

**AT** Yeah, I first did it at Essex Flowers. Then during The Kitchen show I restaged the performance at JTT. What's interesting is, while I was working on the sculptures, I kept thinking of magnets, and began to think of the furniture gliders as magnets. I guess I was working on the sculptures and the *Glider Shuffle* video simultaneously, and the

gliders deeply affect each other, sliding past and knocking the other away, but very smoothly. So the word magnet kept coming to mind. In the performance *Vegetable, Be Soap!*, I ended up using furniture gliders that have magnets inserted into them. I'm gliding them around on a large photo reflector, on the back of which I've also put in magnets. So they glide about until they find their place on the face of the reflector. Each time they form a different constellation.



**RV** And was the live performance similar to how your body actually maneuvers these objects for video?

**AT** Yeah, similar, I guess. A lot of my videos take place on the floor, and I have the camera over me, mounted probably five feet above. In *Vegetable, Be Soap!*, I'm also laying down the entire time, and my limbs are doing a lot of the vertical work.

**RV** But of course one of the biggest differences between the performances and videos is how much of your body is revealed; in the videos you're usually almost entirely concealed by the green screen. How do you conceive of the body's agency in relation to the objects you're using, and how do you decide whether to camouflage or reveal yourself in certain situations? It's quite intimate actually.

**AT** In the videos, the concealment and fragmentation of my body are more pronounced. However, in both video and performance, I tend to distort my body at specific points. Much of my work reflects on the domestic, its forms and relationships, so I often think about juggling what is private and what is public. Similarly, autonomy and dependence come up a lot.

**RV** Autonomy is the modernist paradigm, that the great work of art somehow exists on a different, timeless plane, and that the person looking at it can access this object outside all contexts. Or in your case, it has something to do with being able to almost isolate the quality of movement itself.

**AT** Exactly, and that is something I've played with quite a bit. But even though I play with autonomy, I'm always pointing the finger back to a tethered dependence.

**RV** I also think you're suggesting that not only are these objects tethered to each other, the bodies that use them have formed similar dependencies. In the last performance I saw of yours, *Selections from Sport Closet*, you're much more mobile, but basically each of your gestures is in relation to the door you're interacting with. Can you talk about where the door came from?

**AT** It's a collapsible screen, or a folding screen, and I think I gravitated toward it because it's *just* a screen, and I think about screens a lot—their relevance to video, their modular nature. In both of the performances I've done, I started out with something that I referred to as my "stage." In *Vegetable, Be Soap!* there was an actual stage. In *Selections from Sports Closet*, the stage was this screen of panels. At one point, I enclose myself inside the panels, and they become a room for me and an object. I customized two additional panels that insert between the original ones. Once I altered the screen, the performance started to really click for me. From there, I kind of identified this thing as a fluid closet. And then, slowly, my actions started to be fitness related. I started referring to them as doing reps. (*laughter*) With *Selections from Sports Closet*, I also started thinking about inserting more casual, less choreographed moments.

**RV** Do you think that casualness can seep into your videos? Some of them obviously use an element of chance, but it's interesting to think about the casual as something else entirely.

**AT** Yeah. That happens in some works, *Locating: Catch and Shake*, for example. The final video that I show was actually a test shoot, where I'd been using a different way of rolling the objects in the tray and hadn't covered up my legs for green screen. In editing I was like, "Oh,

obviously my leg sticking out from underneath the tray needs to stay," because the movement then becomes reproductive, and gives charge to the action that's happening as the objects roll around.



**RV** I'm thinking about how these accidental reveals relate to things you might do around your home that you're not so conscious of, or that no one is watching. And then all of a sudden you look out your window and there's your neighbor. It's something that's casual in a domestic way.

**AT** There's definitely room for that kind of play.

**RV** Or kind of catching yourself using an object in a certain way, which is totally instinctual, but then realizing what you're doing. The gesture becomes intentional then.

**AT** I know exactly what you mean. I think a lot of times what happens is that I notice it, and then I end up choreographing it that way. Like where perhaps when the camera's not always rolling. (*laughter*)

**RV** And this keeps coming up, especially in relation to what you were saying about considering the public/private element of your work. I was recently reading Maggie Nelson's book, *The Argonauts*, which is really wonderful, and she quotes Susan Fraiman. I have the quote here, where she argues for the "decline of the domestic as a separate, inherently female sphere, and the vindication of domesticity as an effect and affect, an aesthetic and a public." I find this so relevant to your work, and to how you break down a very particular aspect of the domestic, turning it into an affect, an aesthetic.

**AT** I really loved *The Argonauts* and felt a certain kinship with it. When I was in graduate school, my son was ten months old and I was just kind of coming to my practice. I really wasn't full-on practicing prior to then. I feel like I was really lucky to come into family, motherhood, adulthood, and being an artist simultaneously. That period of time shaped my work and shaped me. But during the two years I was in school, I was definitely self-conscious about my work revealing too much of my life—especially the early years of having a child. They really completely engulf your mind and body, in a way. I felt like I wouldn't be taken seriously, which is really silly, because it's like, Why wouldn't I be taken seriously? It's such a potent and unique moment totally worthy of expressing. And, of course, now I very much embrace it.

**RV** When we were looking at the gliders in your studio, you were telling me how your son uses them and plays with them, and how that gives you ideas about how the gliders move.

**AT** I feel very lucky that I have access to such amazing play and logic. I definitely steal from it.

Valinsky, Rachel. "Alina Tenser: Interview," *Bomb Magazine*, September 2015.

*Alina Tenser will be joined by Nathalie Provosty for the two-person exhibition "Ultraviolet" at Gallery Diet, Miami, opening on September 18, 2015.*