

## Notes

1. Condorelli, Céline. 2010. *Support Structures: An Interview with Mark Cousins*. The University of Chicago Press on behalf of Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, London.
2. *Ibid.*

## About the Artist

Max Lester is an artist born and based in Tkaronto. These days, Max is preoccupied by the stickiness of affect, the ways in which power is manifested in built environments, and the use and failure of language to describe abstract experiences and sensations. Max received his BFA in Integrated Media at OCAD University.

## About the Author

Chelsea Rozansky is a writer and critic from Toronto, currently based in Montreal. Most recently, Rozansky was the Writer in Residence at C Magazine, where she conducted an archival research project questioning notability, collective authorship and the labour rendered anonymous in the production of artistic discourse. In 2020, Rozansky was awarded Canadian Art's Editorial Residency.

## About the InterAccess Media Arts Prize

The InterAccess Media Arts Prize is awarded annually to a graduating student of the Integrated Media program at OCAD University whose work complements InterAccess's mission to expand the cultural space of technology. Students must show proficiency in creating mechanical, kinetic, electronic, interactive audio, video, or new media work. In addition to a \$500 cash award, the recipient receives a one-year studio membership, one year of complimentary workshops, a solo exhibition at InterAccess, and access to professional development and mentorship opportunities. The first prize was awarded in 1990.

## Inter/Access

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Behind These Strange Sensations are Hidden Structures  
Max Lester  
November 3—December 4, 2021

Reading Circle  
Saturday, November 27 | 1—2 PM  
Online via Zoom  
FREE

Behind These Strange Sensations are Hidden Structures traces tangled lines through city streets and cyberspace, meditating on power, affect, intention, and reason. In this exhibition, large sculptures and assemblages made of building materials, found objects, video sequences, and printed image works layer meaning and material to consider the spatial consequences of power and ideology while tending to the virtual entanglements that drive us.

# BEHIND THESE STRANGE SENSATIONS ARE HIDDEN STRUCTURES

*An essay by Chelsea Rozansky*

November 3—December 4, 2021

*Is it possible to trace the lines of a city to find the source of intention?* This body of work begins with a best laid plan: the sensible proposition that everything is built with purpose, that space controls and dictates our movements according to the ideologies of the ruling class. Deductive reasoning suggests that following this line of inquiry may lead to these underlying intentions, to power's source. It's a fool's errand. The logic of City lines are at odds with themselves. The city slicker finds his domain to be messier, stickier, disorienting, and dizzying. "I don't always feel so connected," an avatar says to its double in *Bad Circuit* (2020) as it looks around a barren gridscape, "but I do know it's always there." "Let's go for a walk," suggests the artist in an attempt to unravel such sudden intuitions. You get lost.

Walking around is a waste of time, which is to say it's a hindrance to capitalist production—one pillar of the City's power. Flâneurie, as Baudelaire called and championed this practice, roughly translates to idling, wandering or loitering: illegal activity in the modern City. It leads one to bump up against City stanchions rather than flow according to the right direction within. Organizing infrastructure is another pillar of the City's power. The city slicker is a rebel, the stroll an act of defiance, and also the basis of Max's practice.

Writing this, I get dizzy. I go for a walk to clear my head. I walk with Max and try to figure out what's going on here in this City. In *Bad Circuit* and *The city bleeds either way* (2021), congealed, crumpled up images drift by, all paper-like and gooey, like discarded newsrags when the rain makes their pictures leak and bleed. These collages, composed of

"Image Junk", as the artist calls it, appear virtually and physically throughout the exhibition. Roaming the internet and wandering the city (comparable experiences), Max collects jarring pictures and cellphone snaps of strange material: the stuff that makes him stop in his tracks. He renders these images into amorphous blobs, which appear sometimes as animations in his videos and sometimes as parts of sculptures.

The "virtual" takes on important meaning for the artist: "virtually" as in Online, and, "virtually" as in the affective, colloquial connotation of nearness (i.e. basically, literally). These words are screens, employed to make the metaphorical real and the real metaphorical, indistinguishably. So, like Image Junk, the enigma of language appears in his work literally and virtually.

Here's what he's getting at: the city presents itself as solid. But it's actually fluid. "Nothing is stable. Things leak into each other, even though a city wants to tell us that it's unique in its components," Max tells me. Remember how Image Junk and wet ink bleed? So do we. We are "intertwined in a network of people, objects, architecture, social hegemonies, economies and political structures," Max writes in his artist statement. Or, as his avatar says in *Bad Circuit*, "I am leaking. So are you. Oh what a mess we've made." Still, the City commands us to think of itself as permanent and solid, presenting waste, construction, renovation and the rest as temporary and inessential. Take scaffolding, for instance, embodied in *Underlying Principle* (2019), a support structure made up of pseudo-functional, part-broken objects: the sharp, shiny, janky, and rusting tools and materials you find in a garage. Scaffolding exposes

the City's fluidity. It reveals that the objects of the City don't stand up by themselves. They need support. Weirdly, we don't count support structures as objects of the City. We see them as circumstantial, even though we spend a lifetime complaining about construction. In an interview with Celine Condorelli, architect Mark Cousins explains:

Reading the scaffolding as temporary—which is one way of trying to undercut it—goes back to the fantasy of the object as freestanding. What the scaffolding does is unconsciously remind us of the muddle of the world, which we do not like to think of; what we are trying to preserve is the ideological, the ideal.<sup>1</sup>

The City is dressed to impress. It presents its parts as self-contained. It's buildings' slick facades function as sleight-of-hand, obscuring the mechanisms supporting them, the underlying intentions. The facade of power is also a mechanism of power, always concealing itself. Look: it's the tallest building. Look at that marvel of modernity. Amazing that it stands up all on its own. The architecture of the modern means to render you awestruck in the face of it, and by extent, its governing forces. But it's so insecure, this big City. The second you question its foundation, it crumbles.

*Underlying Principle* is a free standing support structure. It's the skeleton, when the City's skin, its building's facades, are stripped away. Here, the support structure is exposed as the essential body of power, because its very existence contradicts our collectively-upheld fiction of any object as a self-sufficient body of power. The freestanding object is a codependent fantasy. It leans on scaffolding, just as much as it leans on its own facade to maintain the illusion. Just as much as it

leans on our spectatorship to maintain the illusion.

We understand why the City seeks to individuate us: the preservation of power is at stake. Class consciousness is moot when we perceive ourselves as isolated bodies, when care for each other is mediated and controlled by navigation routes. Of *course* the City alienates. What else is new? Of *course* the City wants us to believe that its buildings are freestanding, that its governing forces are stable and impenetrable. This makes us complacent. It makes us believe in our own alienation.

But if we know this, then why do we cling to these structures that oppress us? Why are we so hell bent on buying into the fantasy of the freestanding object? Why do we anxiously align ourselves with the building and not the scaffolding? Cousins invokes Freud's idea of hysterical projection. We want to believe the building stands independently, because we want to believe that we too can stand on our own: "Our desire to immediately decouple the idea of support from the idea of the building is partly based on the wish to maintain our own body as a free object."<sup>2</sup>

Scaffolds give me the creeps. They really do look like skeletons. If the history of architecture is a joke about erections, the punchline is an encounter with construction pits—a total boner killer. These are moments of profound impotence, shattering the City's power: our collective delusion that the object is free-standing, and not the effect of networks of support, that we, too, are free. The impotent encounter is also tender. Beneath the City's proclamation of glory is a cry for help, for a little support. "We're told that we don't belong to each other, to our surroundings. But

we do," Max says. *It Takes 3* (2020) is a visual gag. This sculpture is apparently freestanding. But there's a hidden performance. It requires three people to assemble it. It can't be done on its own.

The best way I can describe Max's work is as inside-out. If the City's organizing systems—its architecture and infrastructure—conceal themselves, Max's project is to expose them: its skeletons, and its waste. The Image Junk, the process work, is printed onto transfer material that becomes his sculptures' skin. What were, from the perspective of the City, cracks in the facade, *become* the facade. To the City, trash is not just inessential, it's a threat. Not only is trash useless to the function of the City, but the sheer fact of it shatters the illusion that the City is functional in the first place. Garbage reveals its futility, its absurdity. So, garbage becomes the foundation of Max's city, through the materials he finds walking around in construction pits and junkyards.

Absurdist logic is another feature of Max's artwork that exposes the City's futility. He clogs ducts with cement in *Bad Circuit* and *It Takes Three*. Ducts have a particular function according to the mechanics of the City: to connect, to flow. Cement has a particular function too. It makes the City seem solid, its logic sound. "I'm trying to capture the fluidity of cement," Max explains. Clogging a duct with cement captures the material's in-between phase, its liquid state. This useless, absurdist, and stupidly laborious technique begs at the potential uselessness and absurdism of the City itself. "There is an irrational sentiment in this work. There's five tiles," Max says, pointing to an uneven moment on *Underlying Principle*. "Why isn't there six?" He gestures to a support beam

drilled into a U-Line catalogue. "These are intentional actions, but they don't lead to any conclusions. They're *mis*-leading." I think about the trial-and-error process by which I do handy work around my apartment, my one-man comedy of errors, overcorrecting for and building on top of my last mistake, only making matters worse. This is still a line of logic, but the foundation's wrong. The City's henchmen—its repairmen and maintenance guys—do its damage control. Every component has its function in the ideal City. Following a different course of logic leads you somewhere ridiculous. It suggests that the predominant line of logic may also be based on a dubious premise, and is potentially just as ridiculous.

These are jokes. This work is funny, but Max's instinct is sincere. "I am *trying* to follow. I am looking for some kind of logic in analyzing the city, identifying structures and power," he says. "But usually you're led nowhere."

Every architectural term is a double-entendre for the operations of power: foundations, pillars, structures, avenues, facades... Language is another front. It's all metaphor. Language can play at power's game of revealing while concealing, like sunlight and its shadows cast on the City's buildings, simultaneously blinding and shining on its subjects below. All that razzle-dazzle is camouflage. Sleek skyscrapers deflect light so you can't see its source. Max and I are walking around. We look at this glass skyscraper as if that's a metaphor for power. All we see is our own reflection.