Diversities in Practice: Leeza Meksin

Interdisciplinary artist Leeza Meksin returned to Columbus for a talk on April 11, 2024, to share her perspective on why focusing on a specific medium is overrated.

Transcript

Emily Haidet (00:00:25):

Hi, everybody. Good afternoon and welcome to the last Diversities in Practice program of our season today, featuring artist Leeza Meksin. I'm Emily Haidet, curator of public programs in the Department of Learning & Public Practice here at the Wexner Center for the Arts. Tonight's lecture was developed in partnership with our colleagues at the Department of Art, Laura Lisbon, Danny ReStack, and a number of students who also provided feedback on the artists that we bring here to the center. So, thank you all for your continued partnership and we look forward to more programs alongside you.

So, here at the Wex, we're always looking to improve our programming, better serve our communities, and so on. So in the next day, you'll receive a thank-you note from us with a link to a survey to provide your feedback. Please do take a moment to fill that out. We'd love to hear what you enjoyed, what we can do better, and what you'd like more of. As a token of our thanks, we'll give away a signed copy of Leeza's book to someone who completes the survey and shares their email address in that survey. So, be sure to leave your email address if you'd like to be entered into that giveaway. Of course, we'd love your anonymous feedback as well.

This evening is made possible by the support of the American Electric Power Foundation, Cover My Meds, Huntington, and the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation. Thanks are also in order for everyone at the Wex who makes these programs happen, including our Executive Director, Gaëtane Verna, and our Head of Learning & Public Practice, Dionne Custer Edwards. Thank you all, Wex team.

So, following the lecture tonight, Saka Ma, a fourth-year philosophy major and student in the Department of Art will join us on stage for a couple of questions before opening up the questions to the audience. If you'd like to ask a question tonight, you can raise your hand if you're in the theater and my colleague Jess will come find you with a mic. You can also text a question to the Wex Hotline, if you don't already have it in your contacts saved, that number is (614) 813-3416. I'll read it one more time, (614) 813-3416. After the conversation, we're also going to… the bookstores open, we'll be selling books and posters from Leeza. She'll be around for continued conversation and to sign and chat. So, please take advantage of that and hang around if you're interested.

(00:03:00):

Okay, now it is my great honor to introduce this evening's speaker, New York–based artist, Leeza Meksin was born in the former Soviet Union and in 1989, coincidentally, the same year the Wex was founded, immigrated to the US, where Columbus, Ohio, became her family's new home. So, this is a bit of a homecoming for Leeza. Her work investigates parallels between our bodies and the conventions of painting and architecture through site-specific installations. Meksin is co-founder of Ortega y Gasset Projects, an artist-run gallery in Brooklyn that she continues to co-direct. She received an MFA from Yale School of Art in New Haven, Connecticut, a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a BA/MA in comparative literature from the University of Chicago. She currently teaches at Cornell in the College of Architecture, Art and Planning. Please join me in welcoming Leeza Meksin.

Leeza Meksin (00:04:18):

Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for being here. As Emily already mentioned, this is a very special occasion for me since Columbus, Ohio, has been home to my family since we immigrated here in 1989. I went to middle school and high school here, and years later in 2012, came back to teach at OSU for a bit, which was a wonderful and generative experience. Now I live in Ithaca and teach at Cornell, as Emily mentioned, but I'm often here visiting my parents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends, many of whom I see here tonight, and I'm so grateful to speak to you all, thank you for being here.

Sorry, one minute. There we go, okay.

(00:05:20):

So, this talk is part of Wexner's Diversities in Practice series, exploring the multiplicity of ways that artists practice art in the world. So what type of an artist am I? I thought to myself as I was preparing this lecture. Well, they say it's called interdisciplinary artists, which I think is a fancy word for saying all over the place. I've always been interested in many different things. Curiosity and experimentation have been my guiding principles that gave me permission to cast a very wide net, to the annoyance of my parents, teachers, and mentors.

The thing I heard the most growing up, or at least the thing I remember being told the most is you have to focus on something, on one thing to master it. I realized early on that this is not something I'm willing to do, or maybe simply I couldn't do it, and I felt a lot of shame about it for many years. It wasn't until turning 40 that I started to understand that mastery wasn't what I was after. Rather, I wanted my art to be the conduit to a fulfilling and interesting life that helps create a generous and supportive community of creative practitioners.

So, if the measuring stick that I use in my work doesn't have mastery on one side and incompetence on the other, what does it have on it? Before I can answer this question, I need to do some accounting. My starting medium and my forever love is painting. I love to paint with everything and anything—oil, gouache, acrylic, flash, pastels, oil stick, watercolor, and dye are just a few of the materials with which I make paintings and drawings. I also make sculpture, public art, and site-specific installation, often using stretch fabrics such as spandex and neoprene. I call these installations "architectural drag," or "outfits for buildings."

I love to collaborate with other artists and have made costumes for films and theater. Here's some of the stills of some costumes, and also stills from a documentary that I

made with my sister Anya Meksin and friend Sophie Pinkham in Ukraine. We filmed in 2009 and edited and produced the film in 2010. Lastly, I love to recycle my materials by making lightweight jewelry, wearable art, and other types of multiples that are easily and affordably disseminated through the communities that I'm a part of. This is another example of a multiple, and this is the poster I'll have here today after the talk.

Not only do I make different types of art and work in many media, I also do a lot of things that some may consider art-adjacent or things that one must do to support one's art practice. However, for me, being a teacher, a curator, and codirector of an artist-run gallery in Brooklyn are all additional mediums in which I practice living a creative life. So these activities are not buttressing my practice, they're a part of being the type of artist that I am. And what made me this kind of artist? As I prepared for this talk, I realized how crucial my family's background and history has been in shaping my interests, my world view, and the work that I make.

(00:09:01):

My family's history has been marked by generational migrations, immigrations, evacuations, and dispossession. Here's a map, oops [clicking through slideshow], I'm missing a slide here. Okay, I will have to come back. Here's a map of the movements my family endured at the outset of World War II. My paternal grandparents, Abraham and Fenya, were from Mykolaiv, Ukraine. As the Germans invaded... Just going to quickly go back. So these are my paternal grandparents and my great-grandfather, and here we have my grandfather on the right and his cousin, Victor Levenstein, who is in the audience, and I'm very honored to see him here, thank you. My paternal grandparents, Abraham and Fenya, were from Mykolaiv, Ukraine. As the Germans invaded Ukraine during World War II, they fled to Kazakhstan. My great-great-grandfather Yosef refused to leave and was killed by the Germans in a mass execution. My great-uncle, Victor Levenstein, who is here, was accused of being a dissident and spent years in a gulag in Karaganda, Kazakhstan.

This is an image of Odesa, where my grandfather went to architecture university. Meanwhile, my maternal grandmother, Genya, and her family were evacuated from a different part of Ukraine and ended up in the Mangan, Uzbekistan, which spared them the fate suffered by most Ukrainian Jews in the Holocaust. In Uzbekistan, my grandmother met her future husband, a Bukharan Jew whose family spoke Farsi. That's my mom right there and this is my mama right there. Some architecture from the Mangan. It will make more sense why I'm including images of buildings, hopefully, in a little bit.

So, to give you a sense of the vastness of these moves that my family was making, here's a map that you already saw. Here's the migration journeys that they took in the 1940s, and then it didn't stop there. It continued as the various members of the two branches of my family moved to Moscow. My mother, who came to Moscow to attend Moscow State University, met my father, who was working at a science research institute for biological testing of chemicals at the time, and this is where I was born and lived for the first 11 and a half years of my life.

I grew up seeing Ukrainian Uzbek textiles all around me and my grandfather, Abraham, who was an architect and whose apartment we lived in, took me around the city and pointed out different buildings as if they were characters in a play with different personalities, backgrounds, and dramas. The combination of Soviet tchotchkes, brutalist

architecture, and Ukrainian and Uzbek patterns, proved to be a formative background and had a lasting effect on me. Issues around clothing, textiles, buildings, and bodies continued to proliferate in my work.

And here's the final migration map. This is the one that brought us here in 1989 to Columbus, Ohio. Movements over vast amounts of land didn't stop there. In '89, we finally were able to leave the Soviet Union, which was a hostile place for Jews. Our immigration journey was five months long and took us through Austria and Italy while we were applying to get refugee status in the US. We arrived in 1989 and were met here by my great uncle Victor and his wife Dora, who made the same journey a decade earlier. These are immigration photos.

Another interesting effect of immigration was my fixation on clothing. In the Soviet Union, we wore uniforms to school and went to school six days a week, so there was very little need for other clothes. I had very few. When we came to the United States, we had barely anything with us, and the Jewish American community in Columbus came out to help the Soviet refugees by delivering bags of household goods and used clothing that were exceptionally nice, by my modest standards. This is when I started to think about fashion and costumes as features that determine and betray not only tastes and preferences, but also your socioeconomic status, geographical location, heritage, and ethnicity.

(00:14:50):

So now, after that brief into history, I will return to my work. In this wearable art piece, I asked my community at the time to send me a word based on which I chose a fabric pattern and made a bespoke pair of leggings. In return, I asked the participants to send me a picture of them rocking their pair in a way that connected to the chosen word. So this project was called *100 Pairs of Spandex Leggings*, it took me about two years to make 100 pairs, which was a surprise. I didn't realize how many 100 was until I made this project. This is "crush" and "bombest," those are the words. This is "potato," and I didn't put the word. I know this right here was "proper" and this is "awesome," but I couldn't remember these two. I have a spreadsheet somewhere.

Recycling my materials from one project to the next and considering how to best utilize the remnants of my various processes has always been of interest to me, probably due to my immigrant mindset. Sometimes I collect remnants for years before I figure out what they are and how to use them. Here's an example of the negative crotch remnants from *100 Pairs of Spandex Leggings*, becoming a piece of their own called *Negative Crotch*.

(00:16:23):

Over the years, I have been very interested in various stand-ins and metaphors for the gendered body. The way a painting, a bag, or a building share certain attributes with our bodies, and this continues to fascinate me and comes out in my work in different ways. Here, I'm exploring the intersection of commercial displays and narrative storytelling. The bag-like items you see here are neoprene bags that I made based on designer bags I couldn't afford, and then poured paint into them to see how fast they release the moisture and what type of painting they make on the floor. I also went on to make multiples of these bags that I called *Douche Bags*. So you see some of the *Douche Bags* kind of in an art display in a gallery, but then I also made them as a multiple that was disseminated throughout the community.

Starting in 2010 and through 2014, I made a series of paintings called *Pregnant Paintings* that investigated the parallels between creativity and the hosting of life in one's own body. This strange time when the body acts as a house for another person's budding life, and this was at a time when I was convinced that I wouldn't have children of my own. So, I kind of thought of them as my surrogate children, but then in 2015, I had the beautiful event of giving birth to my son, Kieran, who's here in the audience. But I still look back at this series of *Pregnant Paintings* and think about the ways in which motherhood is often vilified in the art world as something that you could only do well if you put your career aside. And I've always really thought that that was silly because it's so closely connected to creation. So why couldn't it make so much more sense than not? And I think it does. I felt very creatively opened after giving birth and kind of omnipotent. This one's called *First Perspective*, and you can't quite see how curvaceous and voluptuous they are.

(00:18:58):

Going back to some of these site-specific temporary installations that I call "architectural drag" or "outfits for buildings." This was something that I started to think about in grad school when a professor told me that working with fabric as a woman is a career suicide. So I thought that that can't be right, and I'm so gratified to see that that is no longer the case. I have so many students who work in fabric and they're not committing career suicide yet. So for this project, I actually printed my own fabric because the scale needed to respond to the architectural scale of the building, and most fabric scale is printed with the body in mind. So again, it made me think a lot about the shared parallels between bodies and buildings. What do windows and doors have to do with our orifices, or the various systems of our home like plumbing or electrical conduits? What parallels do they evoke for the body, and how do we treat homes and architecture in ways that are similar or different than how we treat bodies?

Just a few more images. In my installations that are architectural, I never use nails or other kind of permanent ways to affix the fabric. I think of it more as clothing. So there's a lot of corseting and rigging and weighing things down to hold it in place. And then I'm left with lots of fabric afterwards, and so a big question in my practice, especially because spandex is a petroleum-based fabric, so it's not great for the environment. So I think a lot about ways to recycle and continue the life of the various fabrics I use. So this fabric jewelry that you're seeing here is made from the same fabric as this, except I'm dyeing it different colors, but you could see the gold. And these other pieces of jewelry you will see are all made from other installations that I then recycle.

(00:21:30):

In this piece that I made in 2018 called *Hoist Store Shed* at the Brooklyn Museum,… no, I'm sorry, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, I was invited to respond to this unique architectural space that is, in itself, a kind of amalgamation of styles, with a 1980s edition that, to me, signified both a train station, an arcade, and maybe a cathedral. But this is a flex space at the academy where readings and performances might happen, but also a cafe is there so people could just hang out. So I was really interested in how to create a site-specific or site-responsive installation in such a busy space with many different sources of light and many attention-grabbing details.

The eight tapestries that I made were all hung on corrugated and perforated aluminum arches and constructed out of construction netting, which is the kind of fabrics you see

out on buildings that are getting renovated. And then I sandwiched between these layers of construction netting, spandex zentai suits, which are all-body, all-covering suits for the body and kind of fetish items. I also used silicone to bind them together and latex gloves, creating this series called *Hoist Store Shed* that is referencing the type of dance and performance that might be happening in the space, but is also alluding to the darker side of all of the plastic that we are using. And some of the plastic I was using was trash bags, like these polka-dot plastic that you see.

(00:23:50):

Now I want to talk about a specific project and take you through the way in which I think about a site-specific work and maybe highlight some of the ways the different mediums that I use may come in visibly and invisibly into the final product. So this museum is called the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, it's in Lincoln, Massachusetts, which is about 20 minutes outside of Boston. The curator there, Sarah Montross, invited me to propose something for the grounds of the park, which was a new challenge for me because usually I work directly on architectural structures and make these outfits for buildings on the buildings themselves. However, in this case, I was excited to explore the building and see what it would inspire as a freestanding sculpture on the grounds of the park.

And I became really interested in these canonical, oops [clicking through slideshow], oh my goodness... in the turret tops and that's what the installation eventually was called. But I was, again, looking at the architecture of this building, which is an amalgam of styles. There's a kind of Normandy castle that is maybe somewhat surprising to find in New England, and then a more recent addition that was made in the '90s. And the only way that really this addition merges with this original structure, which was the summer cottage of the deCordovas—that's how they refer to it—is through the exterior skin of the brick. So I was interested in how these disparate styles are married by the kind of outfit that the brick provides.

And I was also interested in this symmetry of the turret tops and how there are, if we start to gender different parts of architecture and how masculine certain parts feel, these parts felt more feminine to me. So I started doing some research about them and decided that I wanted to make them to scale on the grounds of the park as two enter-able, tent-like structures, or room-like structures. And these are one-inch scale models that I built to play around with what do I want them to look like? I knew I wanted them to have outfits, because I realized that in order for them to be both buildings and bodies, they need to be wearing clothing or at least that's the easiest way to signify that a building is also a body.

(00:26:57):

I also wanted there to be a temporary component. As I mentioned before, all of my installations are temporary and ephemeral, and for a while I took that for granted, but then I started to think about, what does that really put out in the world? What does it mean that they're temporary and that they don't last? And how is time and the elements affecting them? So I made this series of paintings that I weathered on my fire escape in New York City, and these paintings were testing how fast does neoprene dye fade with exposure to the sun? So this one right here was three months in New York, and this one right here was three weeks in western Texas. So I experimented with this in various

locations, and I knew that the clothing that I'm making for these turret tops will eventually be removed to show the patterns that the sun leaves on the neoprene that is a kind of stand-in for the body or skin.

So here's how they came out. This was them when they first were installed. They look quite close to each other, but they're actually the exact distance that they are on the building itself. But different than the building, they are dressed up and also, they are enter-able. When I was doing research about those structures, I learned that they were designed with only decorative purpose in mind. They were never meant to be used and that maybe seems totally fine, like sure, there's a decorative attribute of a building, but they're quite large. They're 20 feet in diameter and over 20 feet tall. So I thought about, is it a coincidence that structures that are maybe the most feminine-looking forms in these buildings are also relegated to decoration only, the non-use? And I thought, what would happen to them if you could use them? And the simplest way to use them is that you could enter them and be inside them. And this is two details of how they looked inside.

(00:29:36):

And I was really interested to see how fabric will age during the year that they were in the park. When you go to sculpture parks, you typically see artworks made of granite and marble and bronze and glass. Those are the materials that I think are most prevalent in sculpture gardens because those materials last, or they last longer than maybe our bodies, right? So I was really interested in what would happen if we… if the visitors are witnessing an uncomfortable aging of art right in front of them. Here they are with already significant amount of sagging and fading in the spring of 2020, and this is what they looked like when the outfits were removed and you could just see the sun bleached patterns that their outfits made on the neoprene below. So, I call them "bikini tans."

And for the first time in my practice, I went ahead and made a book about the project, but also lots of site-specific installations that I've done prior to this project because, as I said, they're temporary and once they're de-installed, they no longer exist. So the book provided a nice way to take stock of all of this ephemeral work that I make and that disappears either because it's temporary or because it's multiples and they are disseminated into the world.

(00:31:27):

Another way in which I work site-responsively is taking lots of notice and measurements of the architecture around me. Since 2019, I've been working on a series called *False Doors*, and these are linen un-stretched paintings that are made to scale of specific doors in various studios that I've worked in. And during this time, or in 2019 when I started this series, I was doing a lot of research about ancient Egyptians and came across this concept of the false door, which is essentially a door that is painted or chiseled into the rock of a tomb or a temple, and it's made to scale of the doors, but it's for the spirit to travel through. So the ancient Egyptians believe that, just like our body needs a door to enter from one place to another, from inside to outside or vice versa, our spirit also, or our soul, needs a doorway to travel through.

So this series is ongoing, these are doors I made in 2019, but now every studio that I'm in, I take measurements of the doors, I examine the doors, I like to look at the knobs and the hinges as kind of like accoutrements to their fashion style, but then I make them out

of fabric that I stiffen so they're somewhere between hard and soft, somewhere between architecture and fabric. And a lot of them use fabrics from… that I happen to have, like this is a dress that my grandmother had, it actually even has her name sewn into the label. And this up here is a scarf that my grandfather had. So some of them are really weathered and torn, but I couldn't let them go and one day I realized that they belonged to this door. These were similarly made to specifications of things in our homes, but these were the size and scale of different sinks and tubs that I was working with when I was at a residency at Banff.

This is an interesting example for me because it's a show, it's a kind of white box, little gallery show where I showed my more traditional paintings, although even when traditional, my paintings have holes and unusual materials in them. But then I also made a site-specific installation here that you can't quite see well, but it was recycling materials I had from a different installation. So there's a constant kind of flow and cannibalization of materials that flows back into new creative projects.

These paintings also have fabrics that are meaningful to me and have histories of themselves. I don't think it's important to know what those histories are necessarily, but I think that personal connection to the fabric is important in order to generate the image that comes in the end. And now I will show a few more recent paintings. Right now I'm really interested in intimate scale paintings that use oil and paper pulp, so breaking up the conventional rectilinear support by creating these surface additions that are painted as well.

So, with the paintings, as much as I consider them the heartbeat of my practice and the generative part, the place where I do a lot of thinking and a lot of looking and the kind of more private aspect of my practice because I make them in my studio and I'm always alone in my studio, typically, at least. Whereas my public projects involve working with a team and have a very different energy and dynamic. So I find the paintings really important for the generation of ideas and for figuring out, what am I really thinking about? It's the paintings that tell me or inform me, and I allow myself to explore any style that I want in painting. So I actually purposely eschew cultivating of a kind of recognizable style.

(00:36:58):

And now I just want to talk a little bit about a project that I'm working on now, a big public art project that I am raising funds for. So, a lot of times with this type of work, it's not just getting the invitation or the permission to do something on a big, public-facing institutional building, but it's also raising the funds to do some crazy, random thing that most people are like, "Why would you want to do that?" So I have been really interested in what buildings communicate off of their facade, before we even necessarily enter them or before we know how they were meant to be used. This is Hatshepsut Mortuary Temple, and Hatshepsut was a female pharaoh in ancient Egypt and ruled for a little over 20 years. But her reign was actually largely unknown in modernity until about 100 years ago. A Polish archeologist uncovered a quarry into which her predecessor thrown all of her statuary. So when he went through and chiseled her out of the historical record, which the Egyptians kept on walls of their temples, and she is chiseled out, he also hulled out all of her statues, which are made in her likeness and threw them into this deep hole. And this hole is now known as Hatshepsut's Hole.

So, I made a lot of times when I'm thinking about something or researching, I will make drawings, kind of a free association drawings that abstractly or indirectly talk to the different ideas and feelings I'm having about the subject matter. So here, Hatshepsut is at the bottom of a big structure of some kind, and she's silenced. But here, her mortuary temple instead of the mountains in the back is actually growing a pair of boobs. So she gets the final word and she was a badass.

(00:39:41):

So, how does this relate to this project I'm working on? The project is called *Oracle for Brutalist Architecture*, and this is the building that I'm really interested in right now. It was designed by I.M. Pei, who was a graduate of Cornell School of Architecture, and this is on Cornell's campus, my office is right here. And so, this is the Johnson Museum of Art, and right here in the center—this gaping cantilever—was supposed to be a sculpture garden or a display of sculpture, but the architect did not foresee what a huge wind tunnel this would be because it's on a hill, and so all the wind from the lake just comes rushing through this little wind tunnel and basically the works they had in this space were eroding so quickly. And we know museums don't like that, they want to keep the art as is. So, now the space is virtually unused. And when I stepped in the space, I immediately knew that it needs a dress makeover of sorts.

And so, I'm thinking about the potential that Brutalist architecture, which I love, but also find it really interesting that the ideals behind the architecture movement were very community-oriented, very much about creating new types of spaces or making buildings out of more affordable materials, such as concrete. But then in practice, they actually oftentimes feel cold and not super friendly or intimate. So, but I think that they have something to offer that could be a very exciting thing to use for communities. So this is where the Oracle comes in. I've been thinking a lot about columns and caryatids, and this idea that columns are sentries on either side of a doorway or of an entrance point, but they're also often female bodies that are dressed. So I've been making drawings that play on this idea of columns as bodies, transforming into hands and fingers with heels and breasts and other body parts and acting out. Not being straight, not being solid, not actually being able to hold the weight of that cantilever.

(00:42:43):

And here is some computer rendering. So in my process, once I have an idea that I'm developing, I will make renderings, trying things on on the building itself, like... what's her name? The actress does in Clueless, with that program. I'm like, "Does this color make the building look fat?" I think it looks just right, and but I'm also just playing through the different configurations of the columns. Should they repeat over and over? Should they all be different? But the goal eventually is that they would be made out of neoprene, painted neoprene, and have a strikingly different outside and an inside. So this is the exterior and here's the interior, and the interior would then serve as a site for oracular possibility.

And the way that I plan to enact that possibility is through workshops in the Tarot, Chinese astrology, western zodiac, meditation, sculpting out of clay, in order to come up with a kind of vision. So basically, all these different divination techniques that I have been exploring for decades in my own personal practice without really thinking that it has any place in my art practice. It was just something I really love and enjoy doing, but now I am starting to see these two branches of my interests come together and figuring out

how this clothing for Brutalist structure could actually create a womb-like stage for people to use this space in a different, more body-affirming, more inclusive, and personally intimate way than institutions typically allow for. And that is all. Thank you.

Saka Ma (00:45:06):

Thank you for the wonderful talk, Leeza. Thank you for coming, it's really nice having you here. I'll be louder. So hi, everyone, my name is Saka, I'm a philosophy student at OSU, I also do art. And tonight I'm going to start out the Q&A session with a couple of questions of my own, and then the floor is open to yours. Is that okay? Yeah? Okay.

Okay, so my first question is for Leeza, is regarding your architectural drag pieces, including the household piece. Looking at this piece, I see power going in two ways. On one way it is you, the artist and your art is the power of those fabrics. They are colorful, they are wrapping, as you were saying, those outside, outlook of these buildings is the final word on what the building has to say. This is explanatory power that you're holding over the structure that you're wrapping inside of it. But on the other hand, I like to think about, how long do these installations stay, and who is there to make those decisions, and who is there to decide which building are you allowed to wrap? So, in that sense, I see the power flowing the other way, like what's inside the building, the muscular and hard institutional building that you are experiencing the power of that when you're navigating through the system and try to install these pieces. So, I wonder if you want to talk a little bit about that, how you—

Leeza Meksin (00:47:06):

Thank you so much for that question, that's really super interesting for me. I appreciate you thinking about the power flow. I think, in my experience, every time I make an installation like that, it's different. The circumstances are different, the access point is different. So I'll speak directly to *House Coat*, since that's the one you brought up and that's also the one that I showed today. *House Coat* was the home and site of a artist-run gallery called Cosign Projects in St. Louis. And when two, at the time, acquaintances of mine—who later became friends through this process—they sent out a call to their contacts with a picture of the house, which is like an Ugly Betty, it was all a little crooked and just very dear to me immediately. As soon as I saw it, I was like, I want to make a spandex outfit for this building. And so, their idea was that the gallery that they run while living in this building is on the exterior of the building. So a lot of artists, as they were working with, were making flags or posters that you see through the windows. And I thought, well, this is perfect. This is a perfect way to try out my spandex makeover idea, which initiated as a way to tweak the straight masculine gender of architecture, kind of queer it.

And so, I pitched the idea to them and they were like, this is crazy, we love it, but how would you do this? We don't understand.

So I applied for many grants and got rejected from every single one, and it was becoming clear that this is only a dream of mine, but I felt really stubborn about it, which I get occasionally. And I decided to do a Kickstarter campaign to raise funds for it, which I honestly don't recommend doing again. So I hope there's no Kickstarter lovers here, but it was nothing against Kickstarter, it's just that extra labor was very hard to handle, in addition to the installation labor. But then the process was making the design for the

fabric, having it printed. I actually had to print it overseas, then it arrived in the garment district in New York, and I went to pick up 11 bolts of fabric and was just stunned by that amount, and I still have a roll of that fabric, which I think I will just save.

But the friends who lived in this house, they were renting it and they did get permission from the landlords to do this. But I think when you say like, oh yeah, an artist wants to do a spandex outfit for the house, people are kind of like, okay, sure, weird, but whatever. But I think once it actually started going up, they felt like it's not what they agreed to and that's not what they approved, and they suddenly had a lot of issues with it. And some of my friends who the crew that I worked with for that project was made exclusively of friends and family. So this is back in the day when I really couldn't afford to have a crew that I paid. And so, I used the labor of my friends and family. Helen is here to testify to the truth of this. But I thought about all the different talents my friends had, and several of them came to St. Louis with me or met me in St. Louis and it was a really skeletal crew.

And it took us about 10 days, but during those 10 days, the landlords sent the fire department, the police, the city clerks, basically, they tried every single thing they could to put a kibosh on this project, which I still don't know exactly what offended them about it because they were saying they think it's offensive to the people in the neighborhood but I was there every day in the neighborhood talking to people who live in the neighborhood and seeing kids play with it. And I could see that it was a positive thing in the neighborhood that people enjoyed and thought about and had questions about.

But in any case, the fire department came and were like, this is a fire hazard but I had specs that spandex is actually a fire retardant, so I foiled that plan. And then, the police came and said that it needs another point of regress. So that's how the little round window with escape ladder came into being.

(00:52:26):

So, I actually find it very delightful to respond to challenges that come up when people are like, you can't do this because, and then you're like, well, let me answer this differently and then could I do it? So I was able to solve these riddles that were being thrown at me. And my favorite was that I needed,… the City Hall said, you need to come to City Hall and get a permit for this. You can't just put up a spandex outfit on a house without a permit. And I said, okay, fine, I'm glad to do it. So I showed up there with my little one-inch scale model of the house and the way I planned to do it, and the clerk was so frustrated because he kept looking through the different types of permits that he could force me to buy, and they're not cheap, but I was willing to pay because it's last minute, and I'm like, I want to do this, but nothing fit the different... So it's like, it's not advertising because I'm not trying to sell anything. It's not decoration because it covers more than 20% of the structure. So there's all this kind of law code that prevented them from charging me money to get this permission. So I was just so pleased by that.

So, in any case, it went up. It was such a labor of love, and stress, and blood, and tears, but then the landlords evicted my friends. Yeah, so this story has a sad ending because I was supposed to come back to St. Louis for the deinstallation and do a bunch of fabric dyeing workshops and divvy up all that fabric between people who are interested in upcycling or just experimenting with this kind of fabric. But all of that had to be canceled because the project had to come down much sooner than we had planned, and my friends had to move out of the building. So it was the end of Cosign Projects, but they

are still my friends, they didn't disown me. They were actually like, we're going to fight this fight with you, don't worry, we're behind you. So it was the artist, Lauren Adams, and her partner Jake Patterson, who are still dear friends and fighters for spandex outfits for buildings.

Saka Ma (00:54:59):

That is an awesome story. Okay, do our audience have questions?

Karl Whittington (00:55:17):

Thanks so much. Hi, Leeza.

Leeza Meksin (00:55:18):

Hi.

Karl Whitington (00:55:20):

I have a silly question then a real question. The silly one is, I'm just curious what you're planning. I love the idea for the installation at Cornell, but if that thing is a wind tunnel, you're putting up sails in it. What's going to happen?

Leeza Meksin (00:55:18):

I know, it's such a good point, and I've already been told by the museum staff that they're very pessimistic about that. But I've worked with material scientists before for various large-scale projects, and I know the tinsel strength and pass-through for these different fabrics. And there's quite a bit of ways to release that pressure, like when you see banners hanging lining a street, they all have these triangular cuts and those are the cuts that allow them not to pick up wind and become sails. But even with those, it would still be quite risky, which is why I'm imagining them as panels as opposed to a kind of all fully enclosed outfit. So the spaces between the panels with stretch fabrics naturally form slits, which I couldn't say no to. So I like the idea of framing the landscape and the campus in the slit windows.

So that was kind of a similar thing, where a challenge or something that the museum is saying is going to not work, kind of working with them. And this is still in beginning stages, I still need to get a material engineer and a safety engineer in there and troubleshoot. But I feel like if there's a will, there's a way, and I'll find a way to make it not be a sail that picks the building off the ground, but maybe just a little bit of a sail that gives some volume to that space because it's really quite a beautiful negative space of the building.

Karl Whittington (00:57:55):

Yeah, it might become kind of noisy, too, in a fun way. I mean—

Leeza Meksin (00:57:27):

It does, yeah.

Karl Whittington (00:57:28):

Yeah, cool.

Leeza Meksin (00:57:29):

And yeah, that's something that I'm curious. I mean, stretch fabrics don't make that same kind of flappy sound that a lot of banners that are more stiff make. So I don't know yet what kind of a sound it's going to produce at that scale, but I'll have to record it.

Karl Whittington (00:57:51):

Cool, thank you. I do another question, if I can ask another one. My favorite thing about your work is how joyful it is even when you're tackling very real topics, serious topics, it's so exuberant and joyful, and I love that about it. And I think so much of it has to do with color, and I was just curious if you would talk a little bit about… to me, a lot of the color choices you make seem to come from clothing, right? The kinds of things that some people might call tacky in clothing, right? Like the neons, I mean, I love neon, I'm wearing these glasses, but it's like things from one context put into another context and then they take on a different life or something like that. I mean, I just am curious what the role of color in fashion and color in not necessarily high fashion, but '80s fashion and things like that, what role that plays in creating this energy in your painting and other works.

Leeza Meksin (00:58:50):

Thank you, Karl, you're seeing straight through me here. I wanted to be, when I first came to United States, when I mentioned that I got really interested in fashion then, because I suddenly started seeing clothing, the type of clothing I've never seen, and some of it was designer clothing, which I didn't even understand at the time, but I became really interested in how things are constructed and also realized I really like clothing, which is not something I was aware of in the Soviet Union. But that's… During that time, I decided that I want to be a fashion designer and made lots of clothing for a Barbie doll that... I never had dolls when I was a kid in Russia, but then somehow when we came to United States, I got a Barbie and all I wanted to do was make fashion lines for this Barbie. And made a lot of clothing out of spandex, so that was my initial spandex obsession started way then. But I also was drawing a lot of clothing and imagining the fashion lines that I want to make.

And then when I was in college, I did a lot of costume design for the student theater and thought a lot about, what does clothing tell us about people and their desires, their taste? And, but I also realized that theater and fashion design didn't allow me enough freedom or enough, I don't know, enough weirdness, that there's a kind of end goal that always felt a little bit disappointing. Not that I did it that much and I'm sure there's ways around it that are creative and interesting, but for me, it felt like I don't want the clothing to always be worn on a body. I like clothing, but I don't want it to always end in this place, which is also how I feel about paintings. I don't want paintings to always end in a gallery. I think that's a bit of a letdown for a life of a painting. I think it's much more interesting when it ends up in somebody's living room or somebody's lived space and just living with art, I think, is much more satisfying than necessarily seeing it in a white box situation.

(01:01:27):

But I think that interest in clothing and that exuberance that comes in clothing has been something that continues to interest me. I made a whole series of paintings called *Dressed Up Painting*, so, and this is before I started doing the architectural drag. So I've

been thinking about the way clothing signifies the body on rectilinear structures, such as painting and building, for a long time. So, like this knee-jerk reaction, as soon as it's clothing, I think we're talking about the body. So that was always interesting to me.

And then just to address the color exuberance, I think that comes from a desire to heal myself. There's a lot of self-healing in art, which I remember in grad school was a big no-no, don't say that out loud. God forbid, there is a utilitarian thing that happens with art, but I just find it very healing. And I think a lot of the things that I personally struggled with, or just how broken the world is and feeling that in the studio, the way that I respond to that is through exuberant color and also humor, I think that really helps to get through it. Thank you.

Sheila (01:02:59):

Thank you for the talk, that was really wonderful, Leeza, and I love that question because I was also thinking about the palette and the kind of humor and joy and kind of embrace of low-high that happens in the work. So that was great. And I guess I was just curious, I'm trying to think about inside the mind of Leeza, and you, in relation to the places that you have interacted with, with your fabric works with the spandex, you often are given a challenge and then you make something for it. But are there, when you're driving around Columbus, do you see places that you're like, oh, I just want to make something. I just want to make some clothes for that.

Leeza Meksin (01:03:42):

I feel like this is a scripted question that I dreamt of you asking, and I telepathically sent it to you because yes, there are buildings like that, and we're in one of them right now. I mean, come on, this building is crazy.

Sheila (01:04:00):

Yeah. It's yeah, okay, okay.

Leeza Meksin (01:04:02):

Sorry, I just had to jump right in there because I'm excited to hear that question. Thank you.

Sheila (01:04:07):

Yeah, yeah.

Jess Xiao Long (01:04:09):

Other questions?

Audience 1 (01:04:10):

Yeah, hi.

Leeza Meksin (01:04:11):

Hi.

Audience 1 (01:04:15):

I was really,… I've been thinking a lot about the sister arts, and so I'm really curious about the comp lit aspect of your training, and wondering if there's any role that literature plays in your aesthetic practice or philosophy.

Leeza Meksin (01:04:40):

Absolutely. Thank you so much for that. When I think back to why I studied comp lit, it's really funny to me because I made art all through my childhood and that was definitely the thing I gravitated to the most. But as an immigrant, I felt like that was not a practical thing to go to college for, but somehow comp lit seemed really practical. No one clued me in that that was also not very practical.

But I don't regret studying comp lit, and I think back to what I learned at the University of Chicago, which was a very formative time for me. I met many of my dearest friends. Helen, again, is one of them, and I met you at University of Chicago as well. So it's a place that continues to be really important in my life. And one of the reasons I found it so generative was because the atmosphere there gave me permission to be my weird, nerdy self, and I met other people who were just as passionate about literature and philosophy as I was. And it was not a faux pas to talk about Nietzsche at a party. So we did a lot of that. And I do think that it continues to inform, not Nietzsche necessarily, but a lot of my training in comp lit and my love for literature and poetry and theory. I think it continues to inform my work, because I think in very narrative terms, so even if maybe the work reads abstract or maybe high-low, like Sheila was pointing out, there is a kind of involved story that I'm developing about the materials and about the colors and about the forms that I'm using. So I'm kind of thinking of it almost as a novelist, where there are character developments and then some kind of arc is happening, where things are moving towards a climax or crescendo.

(01:07:06):

So, and I find literature and poetry very inspiring still. So I'm constantly reading new things, and I find it very helpful in my teaching. I think that it maybe has helped me to be a more discursive artist. I'm able, because I think that stereotype that, well, artists just make stuff, but then they can't say anything about it. And so, I like the training that I received in comp lit because it helps me to put things in relationship to each other and to use words not as a kind of like, oh, this is such a letdown, it could never measure up to the art, which I do believe is true, every act of language is a translation and whereas an artwork is the thing, even though it might be conceptual and stand in for something, but it also is a physical entity in the world.

And so I do think that language has limitations, which is why I make art, but then I love to use language to talk about art, not just my own. I love talking about art in general, and I think that's maybe why teaching for me does not feel like a burden or something that I do in order to make my practice happen or support my practice, but is actually part of my practice because I get super excited when I look at art and when I talk about art with my students or colleagues or artist friends or just other people. So, I think that all comes from a kind of culture of loving to discuss the thing that's in front of you. So yeah, I think I use that training every day.

Jess Xiao Long (01:09:01):

Awesome. We have time for one more question. I thought I saw one in the front, maybe not. I was just making sure, somebody else had a question...

Audience 2 (01:09:11):

I love that. All these questions, I feel...

Laura Libson (01:09:27):

Thank you. Hi, Leeza.

Leeza Meksin (01:09:28):

Hi, hello...

Laura Libson (01:09:28):

Thank you so much, so good to hear you. I just was really thinking about the weathering of the works, the bikini tans afterwards, but also the paintings in which you allowed for some fading of the spandex, the testing, and then the door works in which you said you use some of your family's clothing. So I just began to think about what that element, as you're thinking towards some additional, the work at Cornell outdoors, what that sort of changeability, that record of time in relation to especially spandex maybe, right? Or especially even something around, I don't know, today was so rainy, I kept thinking about the way that that skin, that clothing is, has a... Just records something or receives something, and I'm just wondering where that might be going and maybe it's connected to Carl's question about the wind, but not just problem-solving that, but maybe inviting some kind of other thing in about time and history. And could you just say a little more about that, that I saw emerging in your talk today?

Leeza Meksin (01:10:45):

Yeah, thank you so much for that question, Laura. It actually makes me realize, as often Q&A does about all the things I didn't say, and that component has been really important in the site-specific work. And I think, as I mentioned, I was interested in looking at materials that are typically seen in sculpture parks and thinking a lot about, why is it such a trope? Why do we always see the same materials? And is it just that they have a timeframe that is outside the human timescale? So to us, they feel immortal or that they have some kind of... They're actually called the noble materials, right? So there's this kind of, the language itself betrays our attitude that materials that last, last not forever, but last longer than our human form, are noble. And so I thought, well, what does that make us? So what's wrong with our bodies? The fact that we age and die is so unbearable that we need to have art that kind of gives us a glimpse of something other than that.

And so, that's when I started to think, well, what if the art started to age right in front of you in these uncomfortable ways that people would be like, is it supposed to be doing that or do you need to fix it? And it's like, no, it's just going to do its thing. But I did feel uncomfortable by that myself. I felt like its aging is unseemly, and the fact that it's looking wet and saggy in the rain or weighed down by snow or bleached by the sun makes it visibly imperfect, visibly vulnerable. And anything made out of fabric is vulnerable to the elements in a more, kind of, immediate way. But of course, everything is vulnerable to the elements. So I just kept coming back to this idea of human scale of time versus

geological scale, and trying to imagine an art that maybe reflects back to us that embodied vulnerable condition that we are all living. But maybe if there was more art that reflected that back to us, it wouldn't be so demoralizing and uncomfortable.

So just finding ways in which art, again, could be healing of that major trauma that it's like, oh, no, I know what's coming and it's not good, but maybe it's not so bad.

Emily Haidet (01:13:43):

I think that's all we have time for today, but let's give Leeza and Saka a round of applause. Thank you both so much. Thank you so much, Leeza, for being here.