SAUL MELMAN'S THEATER OF EXPERIENCE

By Rebecca Rose Cuomo

this mysterious power which everyone senses and no philosopher explains…[1]

Saul Melman extends an invitation. Let us begin with that terrifying and fantastic realm of possibility, the living indeterminacy of perpetual becoming. Past, present, and future find their dense convergence here. In these encounters that Melman creates, something vital materializes: a sensational domain where it is suddenly possible to perceive intricate entanglements of being and time; the dissolution of self and other; the utility of the unexpected; a new poetic synthesis.

ACT I.

Where the Earth is cosmic and the sky is more urgent than the land, in a desiccated lake stood *Johnny on the Spot* (2003): Melman's site-specific installation in Black Rock Desert, Nevada, part of the annual Burning Man festival there. It's a large-scale architectural iteration of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), one of history's most (in)famous artworks. The story is this: Duchamp purchased a standard white porcelain urinal, rotated it ninety degrees, and submitted it as an artwork by R. Mutt (whose pseudonymous signature, along with the year, it proudly bears) to the inaugural exhibition of the newly-established Society of Independent Artists in New York. It was rejected—censored, rather.[2] Though the original *Fountain* is lost, it conveyed a critical message. Duchamp declared that anything can be art, and anyone can be an artist—a semantic game that bends language, amplifying truth in illusion. With this work, Melman expanded the scope of Duchamp's declaration, literally increased its proportions and stretched its implications. The sculpture becomes the museum, and the people inside become the art. You are invited into an immersive theater of experience, activated by anyone who chooses to enter its inclusive dimensions. Melman's message is that art is a state of being.

To enter the installation, you have to step up inside a small circular aperture—about 3.5 feet (1 meter) in diameter—and crawl about 8 feet (almost 2.5 meters) to the other side. Your focus is concentrated on moving your body in such a way that you don't hit your head or your shin as you go inside, grounding your attention in the present moment. The portal plays upon a childlike compulsion to enter and inhabit compact spaces. Is it psychosexual? Sure. Besides the urinal's gendered-ness, Melman's installation resembles the interior of a human body, with abstracted ribs and a sternum. The act of going inside is, in a way, a return to the womb, followed by a rebirth. At the other end of the cylindrical passage is a radical shift of scale and perspective—a glorious juxtaposition with a thrillingly disorienting affect. You emerge into an inner clearing

(*Lichtung*).[3] Tall white walls frame the central open space, embracing the diffuse desert sky. Like a Gothic cathedral, high arches and flying buttresses rise above the enclosure. Across from the entrance, a fountain. Throughout the course of its seven-day existence, *Johnny on the Spot* became a forum for spontaneous happenings, rituals, and collective actions: dipping their hands in the fountain's running water then touching the playa's alkali dust, people nearly covered the white walls with hundreds of hand prints reminiscent of primordial cave paintings; opera singers found the work's acoustic center and performed an aria; two women got married there. At the end of the festival, the installation was incinerated.

ACT II.

The furnace is located in the basement of the building. You descend the stairs from the ground floor, turn right, and walk down a hallway. On your right, there is a room. The doorway into this room is low and narrow—lower and narrower than the standard doorway so it's something you subliminally notice. You become self-attentive, in an immediate way, an intensified sense of your relative physical presence. Upon entering the room, you descend a series of wooden steps that creak underfoot—the sound further heightens your embodied awareness of your own weight.

There's something intimate, and seductively transgressive, about being in this room. The boiler room. Such spaces are usually off limits to the public. This room that serves as a vital organ to an architectural body, regulates its temperature. It's not a large room. It's almost entirely occupied by a massive double-boiler: "the initial coal-burning furnace for the building when it was a schoolhouse," Melman explains. It was constructed in 1901, installed in this room shortly thereafter, and later decommissioned in the 1950s. In 1971, the building became the Institute for Art and Urban Resources Inc. (now MoMA PS1), and opened its first major exhibition in 1976. Since then, this room has served as a platform for artistic interventions. In 2010, Melman was invited to produce a project for the space that would coexist with Sol LeWitt's *Crayola Square* (1971) on the wall and Matt Mullican's five steel flagstones (*Untitled*, 1997) on the floor. "When I went down there, I really noticed the majesty of the boiler, which had decades of paint and rust," Melman recalls. The boiler thus became the protagonist in an intimate story of healing and transformation.

Central Governor (2010) was generated through a six-month-long performance.[4] His first gesture was to thoroughly, meticulously, ceremoniously prepare the room. Opposite the entrance, looking out to the street, several rectangular windows were obscured by frosted glass and filth. The artist used a razor blade to scrape everything off, peeling away thick layers of dust, dirt, and accumulated time. Sunlight streamed in, instantly "transforming this dark dungeon into a contemplative space." Emanating through the windows, beams of light migrate across the face of the boiler throughout the course of the day—indices for where Melman

would apply gold-leaf to the machine's iron surface. Before the gilding process, he sandblasted the entire room—the boiler, the pipes, the copper dials that regulated pressure, the brickwork, the floor—exposing "everything down to its bare skin."

Once the room had been restored, the transfiguration process began. Two characters were born in this ritual unfolding. On performance days, the first character would arrive wearing a blue jumpsuit and spend several hours cleaning—silently purifying the shrine. "During that time the museum was open so people could come in and out," Melman describes. "I don't know if anyone knew that the person who was doing these things was the artist." After cleaning the space, this figure would chisel pieces of salt from a 5,000-pound (2,268 kg) mountain of neatly-stacked salt-bricks across from the iron furnace, and deposit the pieces in Mullican's relief sculptures at the base of the boiler.[5] Another character would then emerge, wearing a long work apron with pockets at the bottom. The aproned character would collect the salt from Mullican's sculptures, and transfer it into his apron pockets, "so by the end of the six months, the apron was very heavy—filled with salt rocks."

Salt is the physical body which remains after combustion: the crystallized product of acid and base. It corrodes but preserves, dries but comes from water: "The contradictions it embodies only intensify its power and its links with experience of the sacred."[6] Salt is "the agent, instrument, and patient" of alchemy—"not separate entities, but aspects of one reality."[7] In Melman's performance, it symbolizes the transition from one being to the next, the salt of becoming. It was "the gift that the cleaner was giving to the gilder," the artist describes, "adding new weight to the performance of gilding."

With the salt in place, he slowly, carefully, started covering the iron furnace with delicate sheets of gold leaf. Wielding a specialized toolkit he had designed for the task, the artist tended to his work with intimate care and attention. He applied oil to the back of his neck, which he softly stroked with brushes, using his own body to fuse each square of gold onto the machine, sanctifying and reifying it into something wholly other. Notably, the boiler is not gilded in its entirety, only about two-thirds are. With *Central Governor,* Melman suspends the continuum of growth and decay, reminding us that being is always becoming.

ACT III.

Freezing the flux of transitory states, Melman's ongoing *Anthropocene* Series, begun in 2015, consists of two-dimensional sculptures of ice, carbon, and abacá (a close relative of the banana plant). Native to the Philippines where it has been cultivated for centuries, abacá produces a strong, flexible, and buoyant fiber from its stalk. Melman uses this to create a thick, malleable paper pulp that begins as a flat saturated mass

formed on copper screens. The artist then adds ice to the pulp—either rectangular sheets that crack upon contact or fractured pieces with frozen pigment that he's pre-shattered. He works fast, brushing liquid carbon into the breaks, coaxing the process by pouring hot water over the pulp, sculpting and drawing to form ridges and waves that become ossified patterns on its dried surface. In this series, materiality is stretched to its limit. Melman deftly controls the process, but there's always a point at which matter takes over to assume its final form. The result is a paper geography, with coasts and canyons, ephemeral volumes and shifting topographies. Like geological processes, each evolutionary stage is present as material traces in the final work—from the lattice of the copper mesh that gave the abacá pulp its preliminary form, to the coagulated patterns of melting ice, the osmosis of water and ink. *Anthropocene Series* can be seen as an elegy to the fragile balance upon which our earthly existence rests, mapping tensions and intersections between nature and culture.

ACT IV.

Best Of All Possible Worlds (2011-2018) is a garden of ghostly doors. Constituted by eight transparent plastic casts housed within steel frames, the installation reflects the same configuration as the passageways of Melman's Brooklyn apartment. Exhibited at Socrates Sculpture Park (2011) in Queens; Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (2012), in Ridgefield, Connecticut; and currently at deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum (2018–19), in Lincoln, Massachusetts; the doors are always oriented along an east-west meridian. When the sun is just over the horizon, its light is reflected and diffracted through the doors' prismatic surfaces. Mirroring the rotation of our planet, the doors become translucent portals for sunlight to pass through, filtering the cyclical transition from light to dark and back again through clear, shimmering façades.

To realize this project, Melman vacuum-formed old doors that he salvaged, a process which involves pulling molten sheets of industrial plastic down onto a mold with tremendous speed and force. The pressure and temperature are so great that grains of wood, scratches, and even fingerprints are fossilized in plastic. When they are removed, the doors are shred apart—a process the artist learned to manipulate to achieve the desired effect. The originals are destroyed after only two or three rounds. Fragments of wood, paint, and metal sometimes remain on the plastic casts, pointing to an absent presence. Surface marks visually register the violent process, like scars of past lives.

Installing them on-site, Melman positioned the threshold of each door at a constant height, conjuring an invisible architecture. They seem to float like clouds—creating the contours of an apparitional non-space

where it's unclear if they're coming or going, opening or closing. Inverting positive and negative masses, dualities of inside and outside, public and private merge, dismantling preconceived certainties. The artist offers a place to rest in unknowability. *Best Of All Possible Worlds* is a landscape suffused with secrets, memories, and desires. A real, tactile space for imagination.

[1] Lorca quoting Goethe describing Paganini, "Play and Theory of the *Duende*," in *In Search of* Duende trans. Christopher Maurer (New York: New Directions, 1975).

[2] For a brilliant analysis of this event, its context and repercussions, please see Thierry de Duve's series of essays sequentially published in *Artforum* between October 2013 and April 2014.

[3] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2001).

[4] Melman told me that the title *Central Governor* comes from a neurophysiological theory that there is a mechanism in our brains that will cause our bodies to shut down if we try to push ourselves beyond our physical capacity. "It will override conscious thought."

[5] It's interesting to note that iron is "the metal most drastically corrupted by salt," and "iron and salt-water are the primary constituents of human blood." Aaron Cheak, "The Hermetic Problem of Salt," http://www.aaroncheak.com/hermetic-problem-of-salt

[6] Margaret Visser, *Much Depends on Dinner: The Extraordinary History and Mythology, Allure and Obsessions, Perils and Taboos, of an Ordinary Meal* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 75. Quoted by Cheak, Ibid.

[7] Cheak, Ibid.