

# **Aesthetical Relations**

**Christina Catherine Martinez**

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## *Convertible State*

by Jamie Loftus

There is something Christina Catherine Martinez said to me a few years ago that I think about at least once a day, and I'm not even sure she knows it. What's certain is that we were in a convertible when she said it. Every time I have ever been in a convertible in my entire life has been with Christina. Sometimes it's hers, sometimes it's a friend's, sometimes it's the convertible of someone who's in love with her, having left the vehicle in her care while they go out of town.

I met Christina at a comedy show a friend and I put on in a backyard in Echo Park in 2015. The hook was as follows: the show was free, we ate garbage, showed our asses, and there was beer and food. (Are you getting an idea of how debasing the first few years of comedy are?) My friend who booked the show was thrilled about a woman who had only been performing for a year or so, an art critic rumored to be better at comedy than most people we knew, even though she'd just started. As a person about to moon an audience of ten and eat a cigarette, I was duly intimidated.

Then there was Christina, the comedian who happened to be an art critic, taking to our little backyard stage with a grocery bag full of props, doing a baking-themed set with sharp, well-crafted jokes about how she felt pressured to present to people, combined with some of the best physical work I'd ever seen. Right there in a single routine was so much—at different intervals she was speaking on high art, making a goddamn mess, and delivering some of the funniest stuff I had ever heard. Imagine having to show your ass after that. I loved her instantly, and will continue to do so until one of us overreacts to something and dies.

I don't need to tell you what a thoughtful, devastatingly intelligent writer Christina is, but I will. I don't need to tell you what a talented

and truly deranged comedic talent she is, but I will. What I *do* need to tell you is what I promised I would at the start.

“You have to have an interior life, Jamie,” she said offhand in someone else’s convertible that day. “You have to have pieces that belong to just yourself, or you’ll go crazy.”

What follows are some pieces of Christina’s interior life she’s decided to share with us. Some are mournful and hard, some are going to make you laugh your ass off, and some are both. Please let her steer, she knows where she’s going. This, you lucky little motherfucker, is your chance to sit in the passenger seat of Christina Catherine Martinez’s convertible (or, you know, *someone’s* convertible), and let her beautiful, bizarre wisdom tangle in your hair.

*Modernity is still with us, ever more acutely as our cities become in the exacerbated world of postmodernity[...] a place of strangers and spectacle.*

—Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference*

*...our system of law is something less than captivating, for it consistently fails to deal with the three questions of greatest concern. The three questions of greatest concern are:*

*Is it attractive?  
Is it amusing?  
Does it know its place?*

—Fran Leibowitz, *Metropolitan Life*

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**Q: *How Much Do You Weigh?***

A: Eve Babitz once dreamed of a room full of chocolate. Not decorated, or strewn with chocolate, I mean wall to wall, floor to ceiling, every inch of air replaced with chocolate, “so that you had to chip off a piece with a knife just to begin.” That’s a good sculpture. I read about her dream years after seeing Ed Ruscha’s *Chocolate Room* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. I might have been a teenager still. Ed originally made the room for the 1970 Venice Biennale, the one where half the American artists opted out due to the sordid triangulation of the US government’s involvement with both the Biennale and the Vietnam War. Sacked by bugs and curious fingers throughout its exhibition, *Chocolate Room* was only ever intended to remain an olfactory memory, but MOCA recreated the thing for a show in the 90s—a medium-sized room shingled with chocolate-coated sheets of paper, like you’re hemmed in from all sides by a sugary SoCal clay roof—then purchased it outright in the early aughts. Instructions were drafted, insurance forms filed, chocolate recipes fine-tuned. (Contemporary art will never run out of poetic bureaucracies for the commodification [ahem, preservation] of a work; the institution, tangled up as it is with money and therefore the real world, will outgun art every time.) I was disappointed by *Chocolate Room* because wall to wall chocolate was exactly what I had anticipated by the title. Maybe you’d have to be a teenage girl, inherently primed for the impossible, to imagine such a sculpture. Eve used the image of the chocolate room to describe meeting a man named Graham a party. Graham was one of those implausibly hot guys, imbued with more charm and gravitas than any one man can be trusted with. Upon hearing his voice: “I have never wondered how the chocolate got into the room.”

Ed’s *Chocolate Room* did eventually win me over. Once inside, its saccharine air is irresistible. The cocoa-brown sheets, white-dotted with sugar bloom, curling up at the edges, imbued with more sweet-

ness than one heart can be trusted with. I can't even touch it. In the midst of writing this paragraph I remember that Eve and Ed used to date, though I doubt their romantic timelines would line up so as to tie off all this chocolate stuff with a neat little bow. The point is: sculptures, even conceptual ones, can be a lot like people.

I don't know May Wilson, but I met her 2017 sculpture *Slunk* at a party. At least, that's what it felt like. Melanie is the director of a gallery that was working with May, and also one of the first art people I came out to as a comedian—in response she invited me to host a comedy / performance night at the gallery. It went off gangbusters even though the night of I was fluffed out of my gourd on emergency contraceptive hormones. I showed up puffy-faced and trembly-lipped after having trashed my own apartment, and cried right up until I had to take the microphone and welcome the crowd of half comedy fans, half bemused, elderly art collectors (it's monstrous, the feeling of realizing you can switch it on at will. I liked it.) While touring the space to prepare for the show, Melanie offered to show me the secret apartment above the gallery. It was perched on that south-ish stretch of La Brea with all the furniture stores, and had duly absorbed the legacy of its environs. If Hearst Castle had a tacky young niece, this place would be it. The apartment is the perfect riposte to the white cube below: shag carpet abounds; the bathroom is covered in florid blue and brown tiles that crawl across the floor and into the giant bathtub and up the walls; the light switch covers are shaped like cartoon naked men, with switches conveniently situated at the crotch. That the men are fat makes this forgivable, I don't know how (I always forgive kitsch.) The furniture lays low and dark to accommodate *recherché* angles of fucking. The apartment was being used as an ad hoc storage space; paintings and objects lounged on counters or leaned against walls like guests at a *soirée*.

I turned a corner into the dim kitchen and there was *Slunk*, just hanging out by the fridge. I felt a pang of embarrassment. All the

codes of encounter between a sculpture and a person were thrown out of whack—without the faux objectivity of the gallery context, something brokenly social bloomed between us. Like when someone walks in on you in the bathroom, but you're just washing your hands, so they still say sorry and you still kind of flinch, and you're both paralyzed by the tension of a meeting that was so close to humiliation yet much too close for any of that tension to release in the agonizing seconds you fumble for a towel while they decide whether or not to close the door all the way.

Something in that mutual embarrassment contains the seed of love. The heart, for ill or good, always jumps at the sight of a person hanging out where you least expect one.

Michael Fried on Minimalist sculpture: "In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person. The experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly—for example, in somewhat darkened rooms—can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting in just this way." In the 60s, Fried was already calling out the faux objectivity of what he called "literalist" sculpture, unmasking the theatrics of all those hallowed chunks of concrete and steel, hothouse flowers of conceptualism buoyed by the aureate rhetoric of their makers; Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Tony Smith, Sol LeWitt, etc., whom I do love, and also makers who I hate. Like Carl Andre.

A chunk of material can only insist on its own objecthood in relation to a person, the proximity of a living, breathing body. This, Fried says, is not art, it's theater, "For theater has an audience—it exists for one—in a way the other arts do not." I like this. For my part, it explains why a minimalist sculpture engenders shyness the way a handsome stranger might. Both make me aware of my body, my scale, my softness, and carry the frisson of the impossible, adolescent desire between a quivering subject and an impenetrable figure.