

MOTE projects (Chad Connery and Anca Matyiku)

ADJECTIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

06

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ABSTRACT

Adjective Constructions is a speculative drawing project and a creative re-appropriation of the distance that has defined our decade-long remote collaboration across North America. Each resulting drawing – or ‘adjective construction’ – explores the question of what it means to draw together remotely, by enlisting architectural tools to push, probe, and mine the tension between the visceral materiality of the close-at-hand and its projection across the distance between us. In this paper we reflect on the process that underpins our drawing practice, one that is rooted in dialogue (between us, with the work, and with our tools). This practice foregrounds the emergent and generative capacity of play – as described by Miguel Sicart and theorised by Hans-Georg Gadamer – as the primary motive for the work. Following Gadamer’s understanding of play as essential to a dialectic approach to uncovering understanding, this paper eschews a definitive explanation of our drawing process, and instead sets up a conversation between this process and three thought-worlds which reach across disciplines and animate our designerly imagination: poet and Greek scholar Anne Carson’s presentation of the ‘adjective’ as a seemingly superfluous appendage, but one that can anchor a work in specificity; landscape architect Cornelia Hahn Oberlander’s instructions for adventure playgrounds; and garden designer Henk Gerritsen’s dialectical approach to (un)natural gardening and whim topiary. While each of these practices share meaningful resonances with our own process, they are not presented as direct metaphorical correspondents. They are brought together to set up a constellation of thought-worlds and sensibilities that vibrate and cross-pollinate into expanded possibilities, while maintaining the work’s ambiguity and openness, creating opportunities for further interpretations, subsequent re-appropriations, more play.

BIOGRAPHIES

MOTE projects is a speculative design practice founded by Chad Connery and Anca Matyiku. Their work explores opportunities for public space interventions to tell the stories of human participation within expanded material ecologies, cultural imaginaries, and climate futures. They have previously collaborated with horticulturalists, biologists, landscape architects, musicians, graphic designers, ceramicists, students, and local communities to make projects that playfully animate dialogues about urban health, the lives of other species, and environmental stewardship. MOTE projects has been featured in galleries, journal publications, edited volumes, web-based articles and at conferences across Canada, USA, the UK, and at the 2012 Architecture Biennale in Venice.

Chad earned a Bachelor of Environmental Design and a Master of Architecture from the University of Manitoba. He has previously taught architecture and design at the University of Manitoba, and is currently Assistant Professor at the University of Calgary. Anca earned a Bachelor of Architectural studies from the University of Waterloo, a Master of Architecture from the University of Manitoba, and a PhD in the history and theory of architecture from McGill University. She has taught architecture and interior design at McGill University, Louisiana State University, University of Colorado Denver, and University of Cincinnati where she is currently Assistant Professor. Both Anca and Chad have extensive experience in architecture and design practices across Canada and internationally.

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ADJECTIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Adjective Constructions is a creative re-appropriation of the distance between collaborators, and an inquiry into what it means to draw together, remotely. It was prompted by a desire to play together with the tools that we share and to re-appropriate these tools in a creative way. This drawing project began while our practice operated between Montreal and Winnipeg – at a distance of 1814 kilometres – and as an exploration of the active role played by distance in our decade-long remote collaboration across North America. The drawings we share here – entitled PT01, PT02, and PT03 – correspond to this pairing of locations, and they belong to a larger, and expanding, series.

Currently located 2647 kilometres apart, the rhythm of our space-less practice has changed over the years, evolving into a cycle of writing, discussing, drawing, making, re-discussing, re-drawing, re-making, and so on. Labour, play, and production have become the keys to our virtual partnership, mediated by the manipulations of software, power tools, and drawing implements used and made individually at our respective locations. Our dialogue has been captured in video chats, cloud sharing services and expedited packages. *Adjective Constructions* emerged as a drawing-together practice invested in the question of how this remoteness inflects our process and our thinking – and whether we can find ways to mine this distance between us. We asked ourselves how we might push, probe, augment, and play with the conventions of our remote practice, how we might set up a collaboration that focuses on the space and operations that comprise the “between us.”

Adjective Constructions is a drawing practice that unfolds through a series of ‘adjective constructions’ which culminate in speculative architectural drawings. It is first and foremost a ‘dialogic’ or ‘dialectic’ practice, one predicated upon a dialogue between collaborators working together at distance. This dialectical approach extends to our relationship to (making) the work, and is best understood through German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer’s distinctive ‘dialogic approach’ to building new knowledge through an unfolding process, which he identified as the hermeneutical circle.⁰¹ Essential to this process is the suspension of predetermined outcomes. Hermeneutic interpretation remains open to the unanticipated discoveries which arise through the dialogue between interlocutors. In making ‘adjective constructions’ we treat the process of drawing (and of engaging our architect’s tools and operations) as essential interlocutors, precisely in order to mine their productive resistance, to invite the element of surprise, and to tease out emergent imaginative possibilities. *Adjective Constructions* thus refers to a broader speculative drawing practice, carried out through a series of ‘adjective operations’ which build up to a set of drawings. These drawings are constructed ‘adjectively’, prioritizing the process of drawing rather than the drawing as an object. We use the term ‘adjective constructions’ to refer to the drawings themselves, to the process of constructing them, as well as the retinue of operations that unfold in the ‘construction site’ within which the drawings are built up. The ‘adjective’ draws on and re-interprets Anne Carson’s presentation of the adjective as a seemingly extraneous “mechanism” that can anchor (a work) in specificity. Carson writes:



01: Twinned 'adjective construction' for PT01.

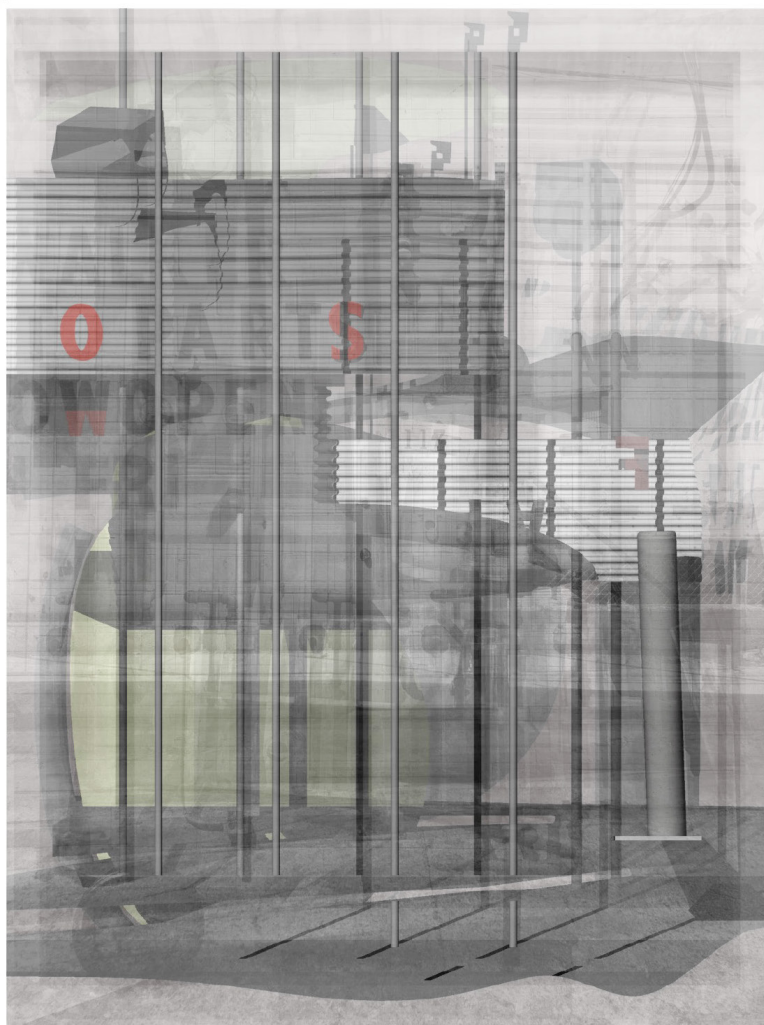
"What is an adjective? Nouns name the world. Verbs activate the names. Adjectives come from somewhere else. The word *adjective* (*epitheton* in Greek) is itself an adjective meaning 'placed on top,' 'added,' 'appended,' 'imported,' 'foreign.' Adjectives seem fairly innocent additions but look again. These small imported mechanisms are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity. They are the latches of being."⁰²

Yet these "latches of being" invite "undoing." If Carson tells us that adjectives create ligatures and articulate specificity, she likewise insists that they can simultaneously make things float. When she recalls the little-known Greek poet Stesichoros (born around 650 BCE), who was praised for his adjectives, she observes that:

"[f]or no reason that anyone can name, Stesichoros began to undo the latches [and] released being. All the substances in the world went floating up. Suddenly

there was nothing to interfere with horses being *hollow hooved*. Or a river being *root silver*. Or a child *bruiseless*. [...] Or killings *cream black*."⁰³

Carson's presentation of Stesichoros' adjectives has animated our approach to drawing together remotely. *Adjective Constructions* has come to identify a speculative drawing practice belonging to what Thomas-Bernad Kenniff and Carole Lévesque have described as a practice of representation that "investigates rather than illustrates,"⁰⁴ pursuing "[n]on-linear paths of inquiry, uncertainty and productive tension between conventions and deviations, [...] completion, and incompletion."⁰⁵ Our intentions echo those of *Drawing Architecture*, a research project initiated by Riet Eeckhout and Arnaud Hendrickx which is invested in pushing architectural drawing "[b]eyond the usual representational imperatives [to focus] upon its status as a site of emergence and imagination."⁰⁶ *Adjective Constructions* explores how drawing can be "a

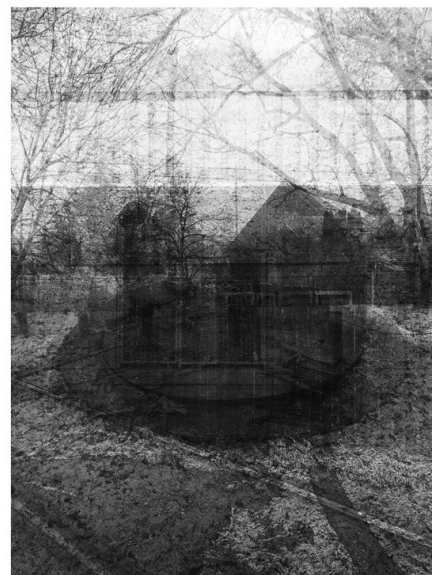
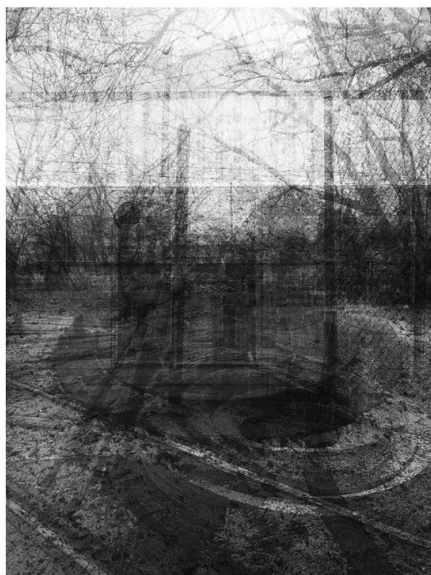


dynamic field of play” that cultivates the “emergence of unstable ground conditions” and draws out the “potential for design as an enquiry to adventure into unknown territories.”⁰⁷

SEQUENCE OF 'ADJECTIVE' OPERATIONS...

Our drawings, as 'adjective constructions', place (us, and the work) in particularities (locations, but also context). At the same time – in always being constructed at distance – they detach us from that specificity. Each drawing develops this tension between fixing and untethering. They are constructed following a sequence of operations that make explicit the dynamic of interpretation and projection that plays into co-production in any close-at-hand physical location, and how this is understood through virtual transmission, projected across the distance between us. We start with a randomly generated

set of GPS (Global Positioning System) coordinates, located within a set radius from our respective positions. Each local player visits and documents this location, and curates a set of ten photographs along with a short text. We describe this curation of site fragments as being neither necessarily honest nor maliciously deceptive. Our goal is to leverage their chance element as generative fodder for the process of creative re-appropriation that will become the future drawing. As a first move, the photographs are transferred to the distant counterpart who collapses them into a digital monochrome overlay. This thick collapsed image is then delaminated into a series of five or six transparent plates. The plates are then arranged on a grid in digital modelling space, to set up what we have called a playing field, a theatre, or a sandbox. Each digital model is essentially a two-faced play-space into which we build our constructions, set up such that the transparent plates of the twinned sites meet in the middle.



02: Selection of delaminated plates for PT03: "Shaking the box" of (mediated site) fragments is another way of describing the play of constructions and performances that unfold in the playing field.

The twinned faces of this two-sided digital construction site are built up through a dialogue of call-and-response. Embedded within each constructed image, through and beneath it, is the depth of its twinned counterpart. We each engage with the 'face' constructed out of the fragments of the location that was transmitted to us, by extracting and nurturing delicious bits found in the murky surface, often reaching through to the other's side. We use a retinue of actions that include copying, stretching, stealing, dropping shadows, planting oblique objects, and re-appropriating each other's constructed elements. Our main goal is to generate fertile ground for the other. While we engage with digital tools that are adapted to the cloud space ecosystem, our approach feels analogous to both mud larking and seed bombing, like tending a half-feral garden or nurturing absurd blooms and sandcastles. All of this builds up to a process of drawing invested in a play of performance and anticipation. What we present as the 'drawings' are the twinned faces of the playing field at a sufficiently-presentable moment in what is otherwise an unfolding process – much like a garden during an interlude in which all its vicissitudes align in a manner delightful to the fussy gardener.



... (NOT) A 'HOW-TO' MANUAL

We (somewhat reluctantly) share this sequence of operations not as an invitation for others to adopt it, but rather because, for the purposes of this paper, it allows us to open up and expand the conversation on the role of multiple territories of thought that come to play in a practice of research by design. As Riet Eeckhout points out, in this “inevitably entangled environment of knowledge-in-process,”⁰⁸ the richer conversations arrive at new insights obliquely, often by way of a triangulation “between the experience of the actual work, its internal logic and intent, and the manner in which one is moved to talk about it.”⁰⁹ This hesitant indirectness points to what for us is essential to our drawing practice: that it sustains an active element of play, for ourselves and for each other. Miguel Sicart describes the generative capacity of play when he writes:

“Playfulness reambiguates the world. Through the characteristics of play, [playfulness] makes [the world] less formalized, less explained, open to interpretation and wonder and manipulation. To be playful is to add ambiguity to the world and play with that ambiguity.”¹⁰

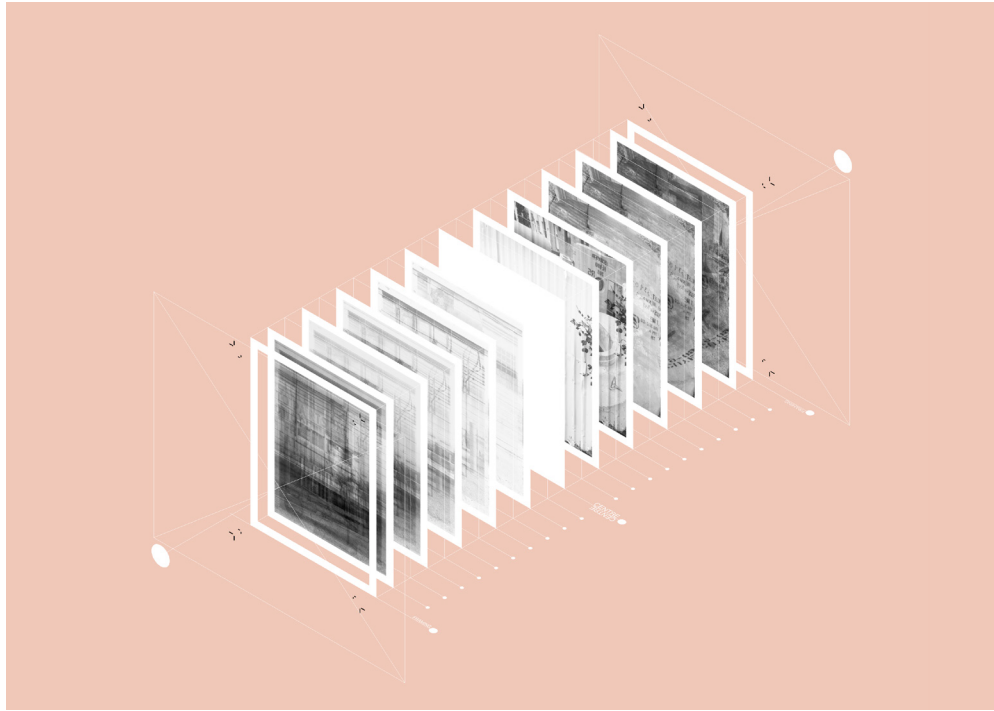
Sicart likewise notes that “play is autotelic,”¹¹ meaning that its purpose first and foremost is play, and its goals or discoveries are emergent rather than known in advance.

For Gadamer, play’s capacity to enable emergence is critical. Play, he writes, is essential to the revelatory capacity of works (of art) as “pure self-presentation,”

it operates outside notions of subjectivity and self, and manifests itself as a state of being of the world and of natural processes of which humans are also a part.¹² In the context of making ‘adjective constructions’, we are interested in play that sustains the revelatory capacity of the work as it emerges in the dialectic process through which we nurture each drawing’s emergent possibilities. From this position, Gadamer’s elaboration of play further resonates with our process:

“Play fulfils its purpose only if the player loses [themselves] in play. [...] The mode of being of play does not allow the player to behave toward play as if toward an object. The player knows very well what play is, and that what [they are] doing is ‘only a game’; but [they do] not know what exactly [they ‘know’] in knowing that.”¹³

Thus, play creates its own momentum, suspending intentionality and explanation and subsuming both the experience of play and the performance of the players. “All playing,” Gadamer observes, “is a being-played,” and “[t]he attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players.”¹⁴ Play thus appears to operate in tension with the clarity and intentionality that one tends to expect of academic writing, making our writing about this process a delicate venture. Mark Dorrian emphasizes what seems like a necessary “tentativeness in the advancing of ideas and arguments about the work,”¹⁵ noting that when it comes to presenting the outcomes of drawing practices “the



02: Selection of delaminated plates for PT03: "Shaking the box" of (mediated site) fragments is another way of describing the play of constructions and performances that unfold in the playing field.

things being discussed are never absolutely identical to what is said about them."¹⁶ Yet, it is important that they – the drawings, the thoughts, the processes – be offered "for conversation [as a] process of expanding the understanding of what has been done."¹⁷ This is our way of pointing out that in this exercise of unpacking a drawing practice, what at times can appear opaque or hermetic is in effect motivated by a desire to maintain the ambiguity and openness of the work.

We navigate this tension by leaning into Dorrian's observation that "while one might have clear ideas about what one is pursuing or the processes undertaken, nobody commands the final word on what has been produced."¹⁸ Our reflections on "what has been done" with *Adjective Constructions* deliberately eschew a 'final word' by tracing out a constellation of three "thought-worlds from which [the project] has emerged."¹⁹ These thought-worlds are surrogates and analogues for "manners in which [we are] moved to talk about" the work, and they prioritize play as thinking-by-doing.²⁰ We unpack *Adjective Constructions* by setting them in conversation with Anne Carson's translations of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*, the adventure playground as interpreted by landscape architect Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, and garden designer Henk Gerritsen's

approach to (un)natural gardening and whim topiary. Each of these three facets paint a partial picture of our desires and intentions that, for us, cross-pollinate to open possibilities for the work's interpretation while resisting an authoritative or final explanation.

A DIALOGIC DRAWING PRACTICE OF AND/OR & IN-BETWEEN

A BOX OF FRAGMENTS AND MEAT

Anne Carson's musing on the 'adjective' comes from the introductory text of her *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*. Carson is a scholar of ancient Greek and a poet. *Autobiography of Red* is a creative re-appropriation of Stesichoros' lyric poem the *Geryoneis*, which tells the story of Geryon, a red winged monster who lived with his herd of red cattle in Erytheia ("The Red Place"). His killing was one of Herakles' celebrated Labours, and Stesichoros' account disrupts the expected heroic tale by being written from Geryon's perspective. In the context of Carson's work, the adjective 'Red' condenses landscape, cattle, monster, bloodshed, as well as the temporal distance between antiquity and the contemporary suburban life of Carson's "novel in verse" that is the setting for the autobiography of "Red." The adjective 'Red' is thus substantiated and thickened. This echoes how Carson reads Stesichoros' adjective-making as a "passion for substance," and a wandering into the surface: "Stesichoros was studying the surface restlessly. It leaned away from him. He went closer. It stopped. 'Passion for substances' seems a good description of that moment."²¹

Carson tells us that of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis* only pitiful fragments remain and they "withhold as much as they tell."²²

"They read as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat. The fragment numbers tell you roughly how the pieces fell out of the box. You can of course keep shaking the box. 'Believe me for meat and for myself,' as Gertrude Stein says. Here. Shake."²³

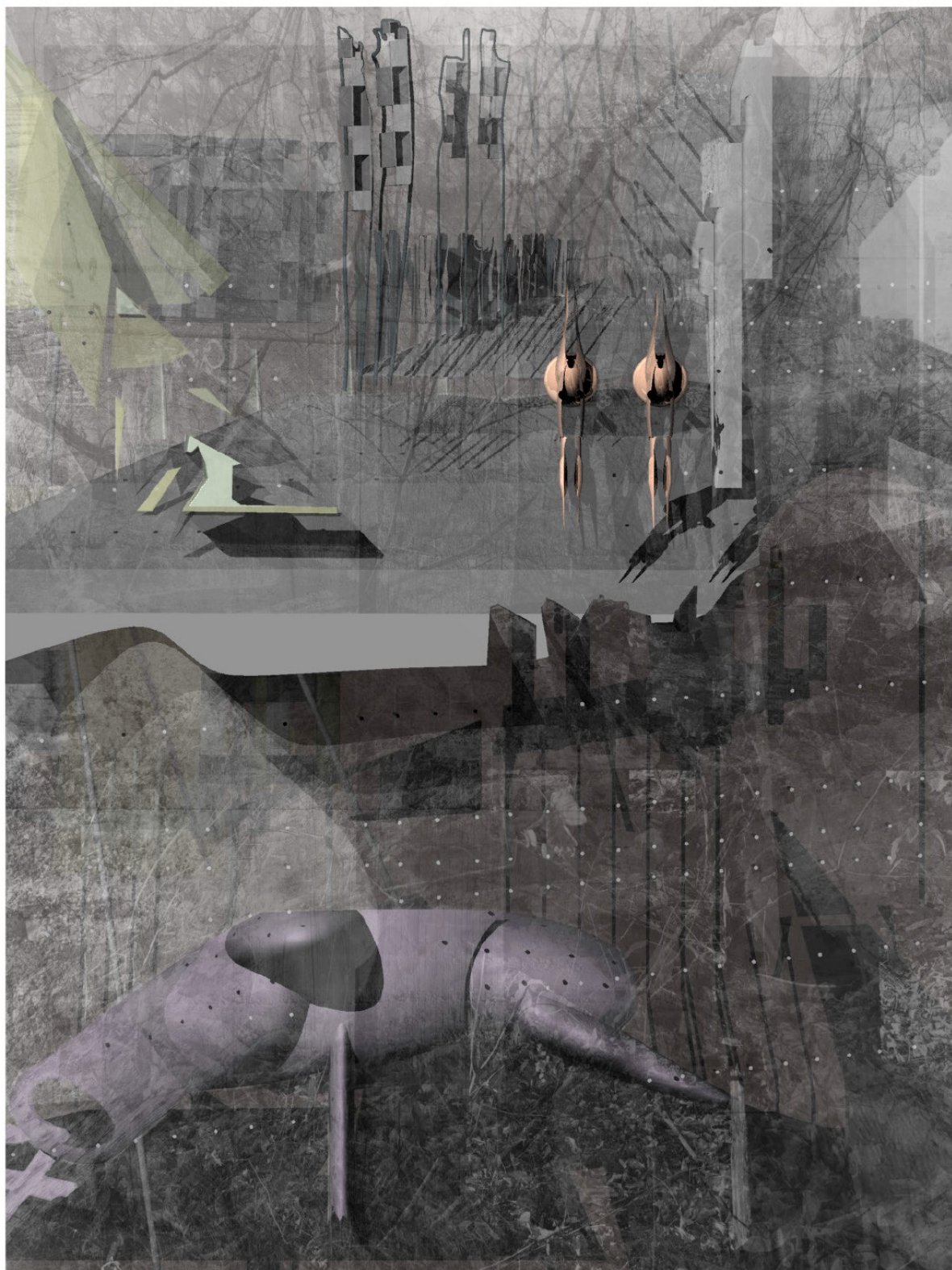
Carson shakes the box of Stesichoros' fragmentary poem – her own translation (of these fragments) from the Greek is titled "Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros" – and proceeds to creatively reappropriate them into a

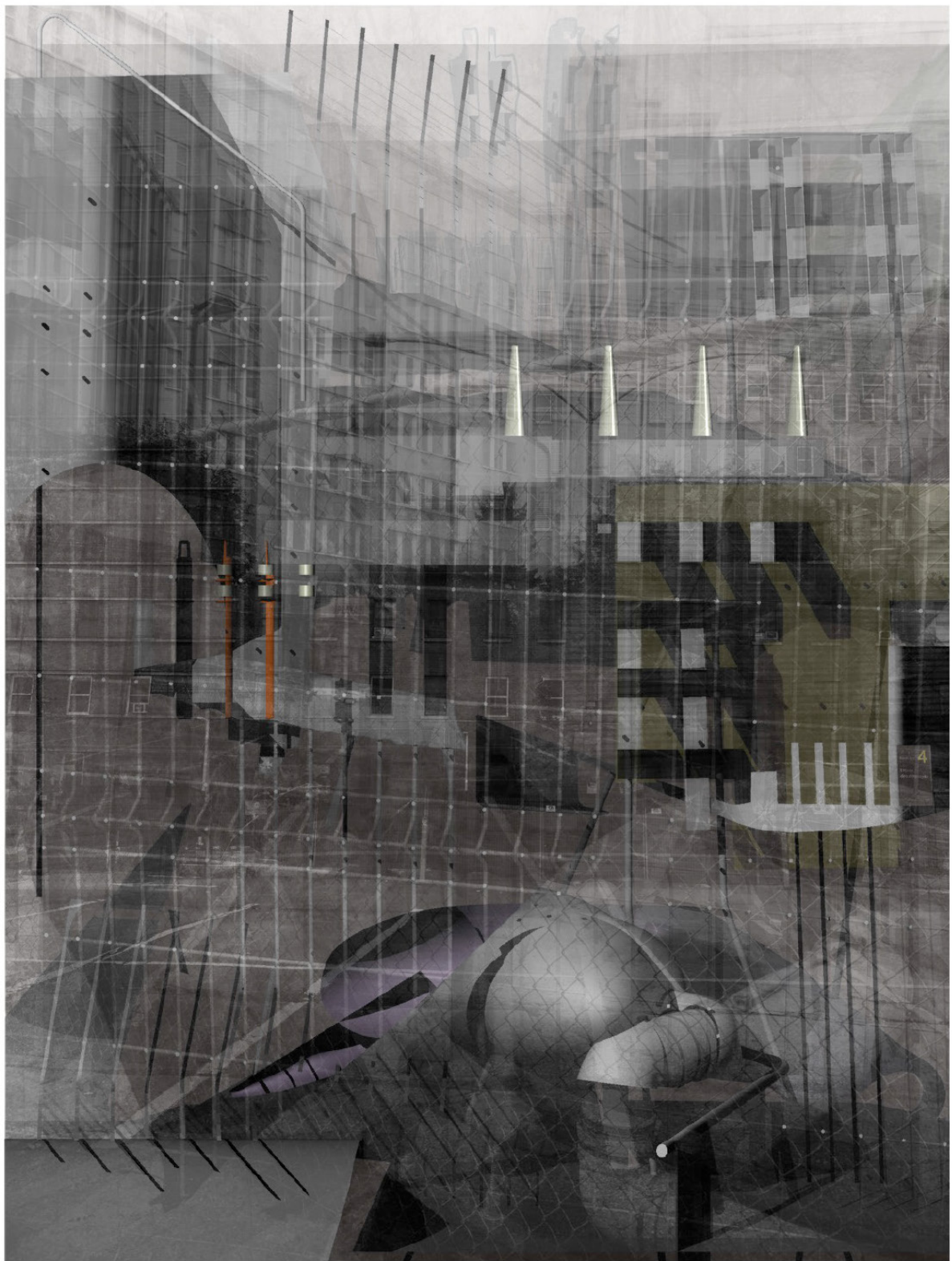
contemporary coming of age story, subtitled "A Novel in Verse."²⁴ The work is in fact neither a 'novel' nor 'in verse' but playfully subverts both of those literary taxonomies.

We see kindred sensibilities between our project and Stesichoros' adjectives as presented by Anne Carson. Her text offers a fertile precipitate for a conversation about our 'adjective constructions' as processes involving re-appropriations and representation. Our constructions – both the twinned drawings and the process by which we extract and build onto the thickened surface – are 'adjective' in that they are extraneous, "placed on top", 'added', 'imported', 'foreign'" as Carson puts it. Like the remains of the *Geryoneis*, our curated site fragments – the set of photographs and text – "withhold as much as they tell."²⁵ Our handling of the site fragments received from the distant collaborator is akin to their being put in a box, shaken, and cast out. This act can be seen as an artificially sped-up burial of fragments and their re-extraction, performed intuitively, to activate the element of chance and discovery. The collapse-delamination of the photographed site fragments can be read like a stratified soil or a thickened surface prepared for creative re-appropriation. Like Stesichoros, we took to wandering into this thickened surface, "studying the surface restlessly" and performing a kind of fictive archaeology or mud larking. Our 'adjective constructions' engaged with and responded to the murky surface, looking to "undo the latches" of our own preconceptions, "make things float," and plant seeds for unanticipated things to bloom in the dialectic of play between us.

DRAWING AS A GARDEN OF WHIM

We enjoy the thought of our drawing process as analogous to the open-ended indeterminacy of tending a garden. This is not a claim that the drawing sustains biological life, but rather a desire to cultivate whatever 'wildness' can be mustered in virtual space. The two sides of the digital playing field are for us something like a thickness of ground hosting seed banks of possible forms that we try to tease out from beneath. In our drawing process we behave like curious neighbours, peaking and pruning through a hedgerow that is on the cusp of growing wild. This dialogue between each other and the drawing resonates for us with the horticultural methodology of Dutch garden designer Henk Gerritsen (1948-2008), a former painter who studied history and politics.²⁶ Gerritsen had a formative influence





in the 'New Perennials' movement of planting design, which he described as "a 'movement' [...] that put an end to all previous movements and their strictly prescribed rules," driven by a sensibility of "constant renewal: not necessarily with regard to 'old' gardening, but mainly with regard to itself."²⁷

Specific to Gerritsen's approach to garden design was his interest in creating plant communities that were inspired from personal memories of wild landscapes, while maintaining a sobering understanding of the nuanced dynamic between the designer and their garden. With what seems like an equal mix of excitement and exasperation he declared that:

"[g]ardening is an unnatural pursuit. The gardener views nature as an abundantly filled grab bag from which he is free to select a number of items he would like to use in the garden, and then dispose of the rest in the trash. But he's mistaken: once opened, the grab bag turns out to be Pandora's box, which constantly releases demons that besiege the gardener and his garden."²⁸

Gerritsen developed a dialectic approach to garden design that invited the disorderly and unpredictable interactions between plant species to play into his designerly intent to create a garden as "dreamt nature."²⁹ He eschewed the rigidity of formal landscape design, emphasizing instead informal botanical compositions read against the structural backdrops of larger plantings, trees and hedges. He understood his role as a collaborator within a broader environmental matrix, embracing the indeterminate visual and spatial effects that would occur within the annual and seasonal fluctuations of 'natural succession', the process of change inherent in ecological habitats. 'Natural succession' differs from 'horticultural succession' – the intentional sequential planting of plant species that thrive and then die back – which is the more traditional approach to cultivated gardens. In focusing on 'natural succession' Gerritsen actively engages with the process by which plant communities (in the 'wild') colonize and thrive within a given ecological niche and eventually become outcompeted.³⁰ Yet Gerritsen's gardener does not simply acquiesce to natural successional processes running rampant. Instead, he actively interferes, nudges, and "repeatedly interrupt[s]" these successional processes making Gerritsen's 'natural garden' a site mediated by an active dialogue involving "constant interventions."³¹

This ethos parallels much of our approach to drawing, where the act of drawing is understood less as a drive toward representational resolution and more as an instigator of dialogue between collaborators and their drawn materials, a dialogue that maintains an element of (mostly) exhilarating unreliability. Our drawings share Gerritsen's unbridled enthusiasm for "[t]he illogical and the absurd" [...] because they emphasize the transitory and the unexpected" in their capacity to catalyse new possibilities.³² The drawing, like the garden, becomes a site for emergence, a pre-existing murky field populated by projected desires and emergent species of inkings, subject to intuitive operations and recursions of observation and action. Both these practices of 'tending to' value generative potentials of indeterminacy, cultivating a space where agency is distributed between our intentions and the matrix of contingencies that contaminate and cross-pollinate the worksite. The resulting artefact in both instances is simultaneously a construction, a process, and a persistent design collaborator.

Gerritsen's resistance to formal garden traditions comes through again in his approach to topiary design, which, disinterested in the taut "symmetrical boxwood embroideries from the Baroque,"³³ gave in to his "uncontrollable urge to clip shrubs into shapes."³⁴ His design methodology of the 'whim topiary' at the Priona Tuinen – the garden he began in 1978 with artist Anton Schlepers (1945-1993) in eastern Holland – not only explicitly draws from architectural references, but bears an uncanny resemblance to our drawing process:

"In the middle of a square piece of land, I laid a large circle of grass, inside of which I planted yew and boxwood shrubs in a whimsical, seemingly random pattern. In order to have something to go by during the first years, I made a drawing of how I approximately wanted the shrubs to grow and, in doing so, I took inspiration from the sculptures of Henry Moore and the absurd ventilation chimneys on the roofs of Antoni Gaudí's houses.

*I only drew the front - I'd find out how the back looked in due time."*³⁵

Our 'adjective constructions' also emerge with excursions into a 'front' from which the back becomes unruly in due time, especially as they thicken and proliferate in the depth of the playing field and cause mischievous blooms in the twinned face of the other's side. Gerritsen's reasoning for creating his 'whim topiary' may just as

well ‘explain’ our sudden obsession with making these ‘adjective constructions’:

“out of the blue, for no particular reason, bereft of meaning, just because it’s fun. Equally abstract and meaningless as whimsical rocks or dead trees shaped by wind and weather.”³⁶

The object-like creature-like constructions in our drawings at times introduce abstraction, contrast, and spatial layering to an otherwise murky aggregate of textures and field conditions. Similarly, the clearly delineated forms of the clipped yew and boxwood at Priona Tuinen act as oblique insertions that operate as visual foil to the froth of shifting botanicals around them, introducing depth and spatial legibility to an otherwise unruly matrix.

The process of making ‘adjective constructions’ echoes these desires, whims, and tensions through playful strategies. Inserting, repeating, and occluding with quasi-abstracted forms are operations that manifest pseudo-architectural qualities – structure, rhythm, figure-ground – within the fluid drawing space. These elements are both produced from and impose themselves onto the gestural and indeterminate space of the thickened playing field. This instigates further flushes of drawn responses between the collaborating authors, like long dormant species emerging from the disturbed soil of the constructed images. We believe that a productive model for thinking across disciplines emerges from the relationship between landscapes, biological entities, rules of composition, and the desires of a gardener. If the half-wild and shifting gardens of Gerritsen’s “dreamt nature” offer a dialogue between cultivated systems and spontaneity, we propose that drawings can also be tilled into negotiations between imposition and emergence.

AN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND OF LEFTOVERS AND MUD

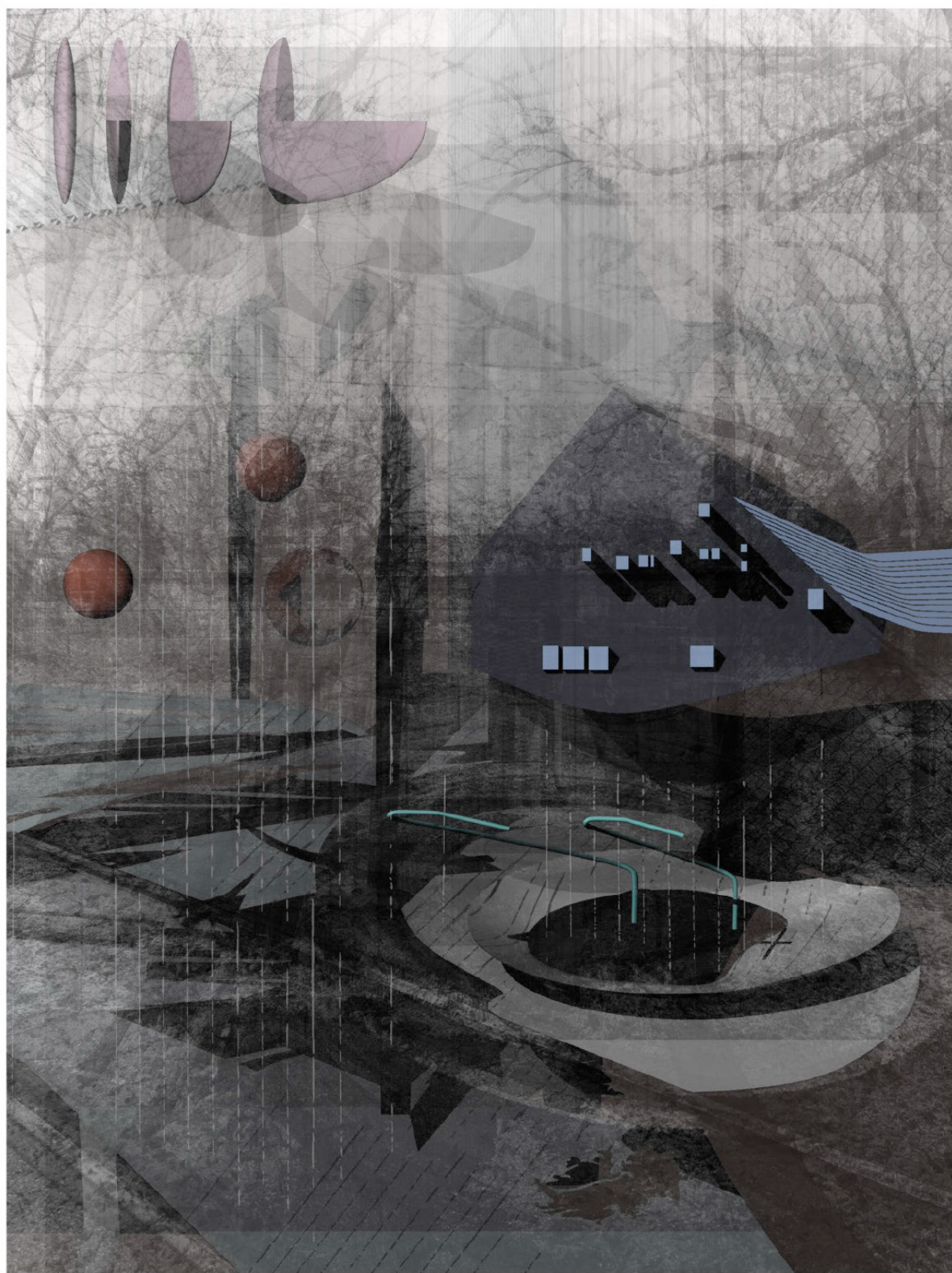
The adventure playgrounds of German Canadian landscape architect Cornelia Hahn Oberlander (1921–2021) offer a third lens through which we relate the operational philosophy that anchors the dialectical process explored in *Adjective Constructions*. Oberlander’s adventure playgrounds eschewed traditional equipment and instead “utilized the basic elements of landscape – terrain, water, plants, and structures – that were open to use and interpretation.”³⁷ Best exemplified by the playground at the Montreal Expo 67, her playgrounds

combined opportunities in which children could observe nature – “tadpoles developing, blackberries ripening, caterpillars crawling” – with elements that supported creative messiness, risk-taking, and imaginative exploration.³⁸ Oberlander’s playgrounds tended to omit structures that signalled prescribed forms of play and to favour a vocabulary of playground features that could be easily manipulated and changed by the children, thereby cultivating a kind of play that explicitly augmented spontaneous exploration and the child’s agency in creatively re-appropriating their environment. In the case of our ‘adjective constructions,’ the instruments of play are our designer’s tools, deployed with gleeful whim and irreverence. Each sequence of operations – beginning with our mischievous approach to ‘documenting’ the chance site, to the way we excavate, plant seeds, and build onto the murky thickened surface of our digital playing field – is invested in opening up our working tools and augmenting play in its autotelic capacity.

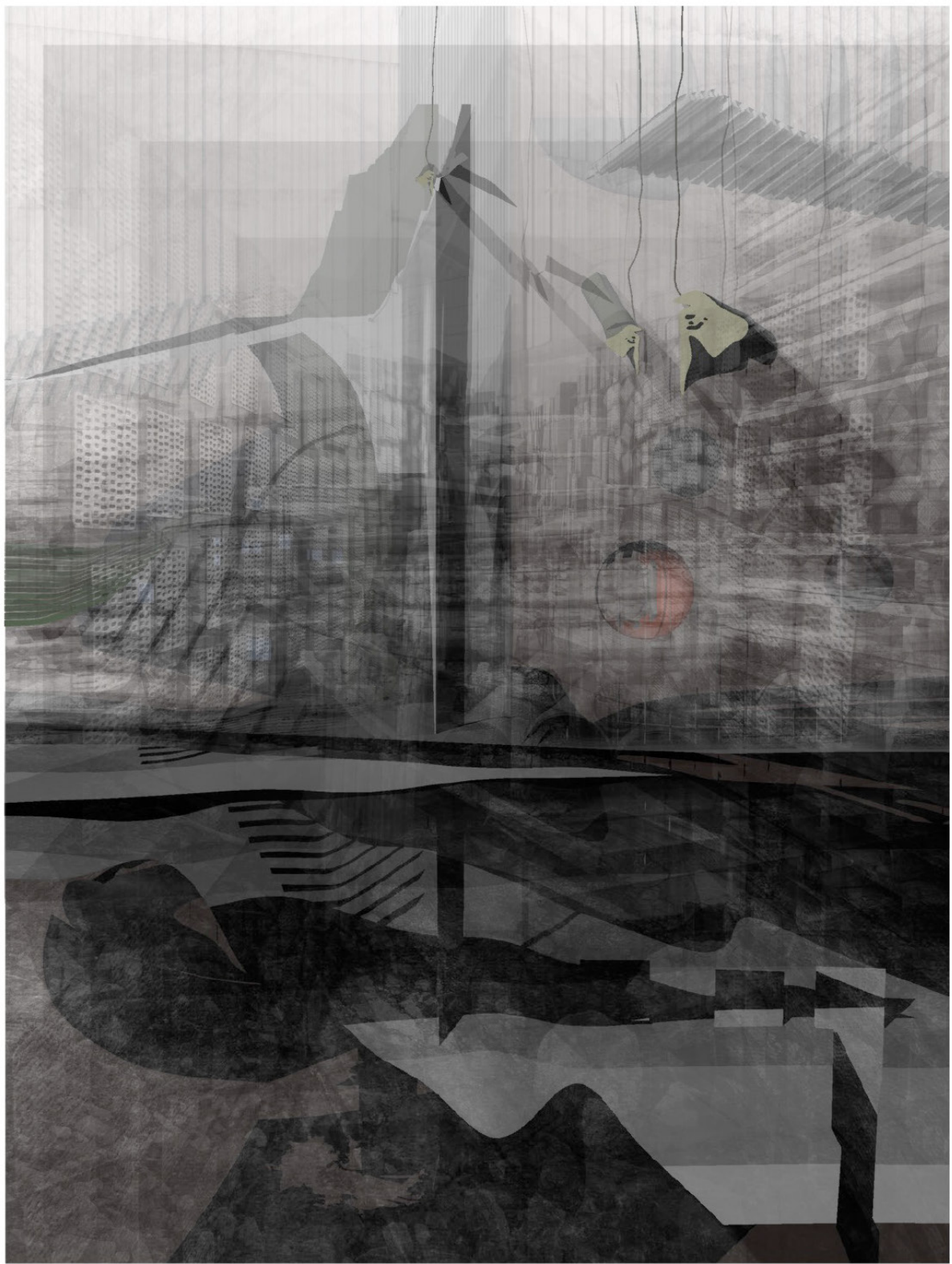
An underlying characteristic of the original adventure playground is the use of scrap material and of objects that no longer fulfil their utility. Danish landscape architect Carl Theodor Sørensen (1893–1979) is attributed with having built the first such playground in 1943 after noticing “that children seemed to prefer ‘junk’ on building sites, developing their own brand of play with waste objects that they found there.”³⁹ This is explicit as well in Oberlander’s ‘plea’ for adventure playgrounds, which lists a series of ingredients that along with “garden tools, seeds, watering cans” also included “left-over lumber from construction sites,” “old car tires,” and “old telephone poles for seats and stepping up-hill.”⁴⁰ This affection for offcuts from construction sites and for obsolete or fragmented elements, extracted from their former lives and brought as fodder for play that might kindle dormant blooms, operates for us as another set of synapses between our project of ‘adjective constructions,’ Carson’s fragments and meat, and Gerritsen’s horticultural practice.

ON THE PLEASURES AND SHORTCOMINGS OF WORDS AND NAMES

We titled the output and process of our drawing practice *Adjective Constructions* because we were taken with Anne Carson’s presentation of Stesichoros’ adjectives, and because we enjoyed its ambiguity and open-endedness as a title. We take pleasure in publicly pronouncing ‘adjective’



04: Twinned 'adjective construction' for PT03.



with an adjusted emphasis that barges into the tension between 'subjective' and 'objective' to inject their polarity with probing levity. Naming and defining however, can be uneasy operations, for they risk short-circuiting the matrix of intersubjectivities that activate emergent possibilities in a given work, be it a drawing or a garden. Henk Gerritsen reflects on the difficulties of attributing digestible labels to his gardening approaches, as these approaches directly aim to derail taxonomical tidiness. This is evident in his struggle to encapsulate his Priona Tuinen garden in a manner that might satisfy an external public – whether a visitor or a potential publication. He shares that he has most often made do with “dreamt nature” and “traditional garden with surprisingly wild plantings,” but that both exasperatedly “raise more questions than they answer.”⁴¹ His abstract ‘whim topiary’ likewise frustrated many visitors who insisted on seeing in them some sort of herd of recognizable animals such as whales, seals, chickens or rabbits, and eventually seeming to have reluctantly acquiesced at their being described as “important people, the Great Sanhedrin, the assembly of high priests.”⁴² Another approach that plays into the tension between words and creative possibilities for action comes forward in Jane Mah Hutton’s observation of the prevalent list-making in Cornelia Hahn Oberlander’s specifications for playground design. Hutton notes that in these designs, Oberlander often provided itemizations of physical elements to be included – such as leftover construction materials – along with play actions that the playground elements would make possible – “You can eat it,” “You can use it to shape cakes for an imaginary birthday party”⁴³ – as well as aspirations that are embedded in her design decisions, such as “sharpen our abilities to communicate effectively and reflect the social graces.”⁴⁴ Hutton stresses the manifold character of these lists, observing that they are “concise, declarative, and accountable, [yet] Oberlander’s [lists] remind us that they are also open-ended, curious, and playful [...] beckoning *reorganizing*, *re-sorting*, and *rearranging*.”⁴⁵ Like Oberlander’s playground components, they are pragmatic and instructional, but also invite meandering and dreaming into possibilities, inciting “creative delight.”⁴⁶ They are words and actions that are direct yet unencumbered by rhetoric or persuasion, inviting open-ended diversions and playful re-appropriation.

With this paper, we took to heart Mark Dorrian’s observation that when it comes to speaking about speculative drawing practices, “the things being

discussed are never absolutely identical to what is said about them [but that] offering them for conversation is a process of expanding the understanding of what has been done.”⁴⁷ We shared the three thought-worlds that resonate with our practice of ‘constructing adjectively’ with the intention to further expand this offering, and to augment the productive tension that enriches the conversation when one (we) remains earnest in “the manner in which one is moved to talk about it,” as Riet Eeckhout has put it.⁴⁸ In taking this approach, we may have risked taking certain liberties with the diligence that we feel we owe our audience and peers, partly because we are adamantly resistant to circumscribing the work in its explanation. This apprehension towards a rhetorical position is further fuelled by a pining for the work to remain open, rather than be pinned down like a specimen in a taxonomical ordering system (which can be also qualified as a reluctance for dissection-explanation and an inclination toward play-discovery). The epigraph of Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* is an uncited quotation from Gertrude Stein: “I like the feeling of words doing as they want to do and as they have to do.”⁴⁹ We like the feeling of language and drawings behaving something like half-feral gardens, whim topiary, and play spaces of reappropriated leftovers. In tracing parallels between *Adjective Constructions* and dialogic and whimsical approaches to mud larking, gardening, and adventure playgrounds, we emphasize the pleasures derived from courting indeterminacy and the emergence of unplanned possibilities. As a result, this text seems to have inadvertently acquired a healthy amount of ‘adjective’ spirit, operating somewhere between academic discourse and open construction.⁵⁰ In all, this paper’s prerogative is a ‘plea’ for re-creative drawing practices, foregrounding their capacity to sustain play. We have made the case for play as the precipitating agent for creative reappropriation that has the potential to reveal new possibilities of seeing and being in the world. We enjoy the thought of audiences and peers kindling the risks and pleasures of discovery through unselfconscious play.

NOTES

- 01 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd, revised edition (London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013), 370-387. Gadamer (1900-2002) is the decisive voice in philosophical hermeneutics and was profoundly influenced by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Edmund Husserl's (1859-1938) phenomenology. He developed his distinctive 'dialogic approach' as a hermeneutical method specifically geared towards scholarship in the humanities. Described in broad strokes, he positions the hermeneutical dialogue as a situated process of uncovering new knowledge that engages the full complexity of human truths, beyond the dichotomies of true/false, subjective/objective. Plainly put, the hermeneutic method stands in contrast to, and as a necessary alternative to, applying the scientific method (of "objective" quantifiable measurement, proving a hypothesis true or false) to scholarship in the humanities. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 9-39.
- 02 Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*, First Vintage Contemporaries edition (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1999), 4.
- 03 Carson, *Autobiography of Red*, 4. Emphasis in the original.
- 04 Thomas-Bernard Kenniff and Carole Lévesque, eds., *-in Drawing. Inquiry, Time, Dialogue and Materiality* (Montréal: Bureau d'étude de pratiques indisciplinares, École de design, UQAM, 2024), 11.
- 05 Kenniff and Lévesque, *-in Drawing*, 11.
- 06 Mark Dorrian, Riet Eeckhout and Arnaud Hendrickx, eds., *Drawing Architecture: Conversations on Contemporary Practice* (London: Lund Humphries, 2022), 7.
- 07 Quoting here the call for submissions to the symposium *Re-appropriation and Representation* (Edinburgh and Online, 30th October – 1st November 2020), which preceded this publication.
- 08 Riet Eeckhout, "Dialogical Entanglement: Conversation as Close Encounter," in *Drawing Architecture: Conversations on Contemporary Practice*, ed. Mark Dorrian, Riet Eeckhout and Arnaud Hendrickx (London: Lund Humphries, 2022), 9.
- 09 Eeckhout, "Dialogical Entanglement," 9.
- 10 Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014), 28.
- 11 Sicart, *Play Matters*, 28.
- 12 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 109. Elsewhere, Gadamer writes: [Human] "playing too is a natural process. The meaning of [human] play too, precisely because – and in so far as – [the human] is part of nature, is a pure self-presentation... I wish to free this concept [of play] of the subjective meaning that it has in Kant and Schiller and that dominates the whole of modern aesthetics and philosophy of man. When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind or the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor that freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 106.
- 13 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 107.
- 14 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 111.
- 15 Mark Dorrian, "Talking Drawing," in *Drawing Architecture: Conversations on Contemporary Practice*, ed. Mark Dorrian, Riet Eeckhout and Arnaud Hendrickx (London: Lund Humphries, 2022), 15.
- 16 Dorrian, "Talking Drawing," 15.
- 17 Dorrian, "Talking Drawing," 15.
- 18 Dorrian, "Talking Drawing," 15.
- 19 Eeckhout, "Dialogical Entanglement," 9.
- 20 Eeckhout, "Dialogical Entanglement," 9.
- 21 Carson, *Autobiography of Red*, 5.
- 22 Carson, *Autobiography of Red*, 6.
- 23 Carson, *Autobiography of Red*, 6-7. Carson does not identify the provenance of the Gertrude Stein citation.
- 24 Carson, "Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros," in *Autobiography of Red*, 9-14. Here Carson translates the historical fragments from the ancient Greek. Her second "translation" is her creative re-interpretation of the fragments into a contemporary coming of age story centered on the supposedly "autobiographic" account of a suburban teenage Geryon.
- 25 Carson, *Autobiography of Red*, 6.
- 26 Tim Richardson, *The New English Garden* (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2013), 137.
- 27 Henk Gerritsen, *Essay on Gardening* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura Press, 2014), 78. As Tim Richardson observes: "A new palette of repeated grasses and large drifts of perennials (frequently tall or daisy-flowered) began to have an influence, in a movement initially known as the 'Dutch Wave', occasionally as 'matrix planting' but later more commonly as 'New Perennials'." Richardson, *The New English Garden*, 8.
- 28 Gerritsen, *Essay on Gardening*, 65.
- 29 Gerritsen, *Essay on Gardening*, 11.
- 30 Gerritsen, *Essay on Gardening*, 85.
- 31 Gerritsen, *Essay on Gardening*, 90. Gerritsen writes: "Gardens are by definition dynamic environments. Because there are constant interventions, the natural succession – or in other words nature's attempt to establish equilibrium – is repeatedly interrupted."
- 32 Gerritsen, *Essay on Gardening*, 335.
- 33 Gerritsen, *Essay on Gardening*, 312.
- 34 Gerritsen, *Essay on Gardening*, 312.
- 35 Gerritsen, *Essay on Gardening*, 329. Emphasis added.
- 36 Gerritsen, *Essay on Gardening*, 329.
- 37 Susan Herrington, *Cornelia Hahn Oberlander: Making the modern landscape* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 106.
- 38 Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, *Cornelia Hahn Oberlander on Pedagogical Playgrounds* (Montreal, Quebec: Concordia University Press: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2023), 7.
- 39 Oberlander, "A Short History of Outdoor Play Spaces," in *Cornelia Hahn Oberlander on Pedagogical Playgrounds*, 99.
- 40 Oberlander, "Playgrounds... A Plea for Utopia or the Re-cycled Empty Lot (1972)" in *Cornelia Hahn Oberlander on Pedagogical Playgrounds*, 61-68.
- 41 Gerritsen, *Essay on Gardening*, 11.
- 42 Gerritsen, *Essay on Gardening*, 329.

- 43 Jane Hutton, "Introduction: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander's Curriculum for Play," in *Oberlander, Cornelia Hahn Oberlander on Pedagogical Playgrounds*, 8.
- 44 Hutton, "Introduction: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander's Curriculum for Play," 7.
- 45 Hutton, "Introduction: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander's Curriculum for Play," 9. Emphasis in the original.
- 46 Hutton, "Introduction: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander's Curriculum for Play," 9.
- 47 Dorrian, "Talking Drawing," 15.
- 48 Eeckhout, "Dialogical Entanglement," 9.
- 49 Carson, *Autobiography of Red*, 3. Carson does not identify the provenance of the Gertrude Stein citation.
- 50 We are grateful to Chris French for this observation, made during our editorial discussions.

FIGURES

- 01 Twinned 'adjective construction' for PT01, Chad Connery and Anca Matyiku.
- 02 Selection of Delaminated Plates for PT03, Chad Connery and Anca Matyiku.
- 03 Digital Space of the Playing Field, Chad Connery and Anca Matyiku.
- 04 Twinned 'adjective construction' for PT02, Chad Connery and Anca Matyiku.
- 05 Twinned 'adjective construction' for PT03, Chad Connery and Anca Matyiku.

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