

# B. Ingrid Olson Forehead and Brain

Albright-Knox Art Gallery  
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Gallery for Small Sculpture

Organized by  
Godin-Spaulding Curator & Curator  
for the Collection Holly E. Hughes

## Thinking Space

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B. Ingrid Olson builds on the idea of the relative position of one's own body to surrounding space and the ways in which chance, the passing of time, and the "power dynamics of seeing, versus being seen," come into play.<sup>1</sup> She addresses these concepts in sculptural and photographic works in which she employs the proportions and capacities of her body as compositional tools. Yet, the components of this exhibition, entitled *Forehead and Brain*, are a departure from previous work. Here, Olson considers not only ways to compress her own body in a space—and ultimately the picture plane—but also the body as it relates to existing architecture. Following a site visit to the Albright-Knox in December 2016, the artist conceived of the installation based on her initial impression of the rounded wall of the museum's Gallery for Small Sculpture, which she equated to a mental, perceptual space. To her, it felt like the interior of a forehead, with the cases serving as cognitive recesses—segments of the brain—"where individual thoughts, impressions, sensations, and memories are tucked away."<sup>2</sup>

This installation utilizes the Gallery for Small Sculpture's existing framework and architectural interventions to interrupt the experience of looking, a gesture Olson describes as "similar to a footnote taking a reader out of an otherwise engrossing experience."<sup>3</sup> She conceived of the work in this gallery with an end goal of making viewers more conscious of their own bodies in the space, disrupting a passive viewing experience. Here, marginalia, endnotes, and other structures that guide the eye, or complicate information and referents, take hold. The site's history also inspired this notion; the hemicycle originally served as a lecture hall and then, from 1962 until 1992, as the museum's library (fig. 1).



Fig. 1  
Albright-Knox Art Gallery Library  
located in the 1905 Building (now the  
Gallery for Small Sculpture) in 1962.  
Image courtesy of the Albright-Knox  
Art Gallery Digital Assets Collection  
and Archives, Buffalo, New York.  
Photograph by Sherwin Greenberg.

For Olson, thinking through the presentation of these works was not unlike the process of writing a book. The configuration of the gallery allowed her to conceive of the installation in three sections: Introduction, Body (each object functioning as a chapter), and Endnotes. Olson engaged writer Kate Zambreno to pen an introduction to the exhibition that she then made into an artwork in which she focuses the viewer's attention to the structure of the page. Zambreno's four-part essay—each section named after the title of a work in the exhibition—is self-aware, reflective, referential, and at times, a successfully strange preamble composed in fits and starts that correlates the body with text and space.



When Olson began taking photographs, she employed a digital camera but never felt entirely satisfied with the results. She began to consider analog means of image capturing after a friend lent her a camera to try. The camera was accidentally preloaded with slide film—an oversight that Olson only

realized when taking the exposed stock to be developed. Upon getting the cross-processed negatives back, she was pleasantly surprised by the seemingly eerie results, the sharp contrasts of light and dark and unpredictable color. About this early discovery, Olson says, "There's a lot of things that happen in film that could not happen digitally . . . it was a happy accident that put me on this track." <sup>4</sup>

Olson's creative process is performative. She is continually drawn to the erratic nature of cross-processing slide film and the bright flash of 90s-style point-and-shoot cameras—tools that support her inherent desire to break up the pictorial plane and create a disorienting image. "Using slide film is a gamble," she commented. "Sometimes the results exceed my expectations. Other times, the content or composition of an image might be striking, but the exaggerated color of the film is too acrid, or the deepened contrast makes a darker image illegible. . . . But I think it's still worth it to me in order to get the unexpected results."<sup>5</sup> She also incorporates drawn images, sculptural prosthetic props, found items, and repeated gestures to activate, transform, and question the means by which she can occupy space. The resulting photographs often come across as isolated, fragmented, spatially collaged crops of various body parts. From a female perspective, her imagery challenges to what extent archetypal myths, stereotypes, or social constructs can inform one's reading of particular gestures, forms, or textural elements. Leslie Kanes Weisman, who has been instrumental in creating and promoting universal applications for design practice and pedagogical models for teaching, reinforces this sentiment, stating, "Physical space and social space reflect and rebound upon each other. Both the world 'out there' and the worlds inside ourselves depend upon and conform our socially learned perceptions and values."<sup>6</sup>

How do we conceive of spaces in which ideas and information are shared, such as a museum or library, as gendered? When Olson first encountered the Gallery for Small Sculpture, the curved wall of the hemicycle immediately stood out to her. It became the perfect environment in which to tease out her underlying concepts. Given that structural design often embraces right angles and sharp meeting points, the idea of a rounded space suggested to her an injection of a "feminine

quality into a masculine structure.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the gallery’s structure brought to Olson’s mind the *Endless House*—a never fully realized project by visionary architect Frederick Kiesler (American, born Austria-Hungary, 1890–1965), who conceived of his curvilinear concrete structure as devoid of corners or any other type of tectonic seaming. Explaining his vision for the design, Kiesler wrote:

It is endless like the human body. There is no beginning and end to it. The “*Endless*” is rather sensuous. More like the female body in contrast to sharp-angled male architecture.

All ends meet in the “*Endless*” as they meet in life. Life’s rhythms are cyclical. All ends of living meet during twenty-four hours, during a week, a lifetime. They touch one another with the kiss of time. They shake hands, stay, say goodbye, return through the same or other doors, come and go through multi-links, secretive or obvious, or through the whims of memory.<sup>8</sup>

Kiesler’s *Endless House* was also the inspirational starting point for Olson’s corner reliefs. In *Waxed void, endless house* (p. 16), for example, she chose to draw the viewer’s attention to the nuances of corner construction. The artist has extracted from Kiesler’s theories “the idea of creating an organic space in something that is continuous. . . . In the reliefs, I am seeking to combine a feminine form or more organic form with a very rigid structure, like a rectangle or frame.”<sup>9</sup> In her architectural reliefs, Olson aims to depict space by way of a scaled-down, stacked, or condensed arrangement that is analogous to how she compresses three-dimensional volume in her photographs.

Olson’s current sculptural practice grew out of a discovery she made while in a former studio. She came across a pencil tray in a desk drawer, perhaps left there by the previous tenant. Its crossbars and interior chambers seeded an idea that has evolved into a series of sculptural reliefs. Holding the tray up to the wall, Olson realized that its perpendicular joists had a relationship to both the crossbars of canvas stretchers and the crosshairs of a camera’s viewfinder. Initially, she turned the original object into an artwork, painting yellows and greens

over the top of its existing surface, and then made a sequence of five black casted sculptures from it (fig. 2). Furthermore, the artist perceived each compartment and its slightly curved recesses in relationship to the body and began to cast and subtly alter just the interior curve of the original tray. This led Olson to imagine the concavities of sculptures she wanted to execute as areas in which one could press in a forearm, a shin, a thigh.



Fig. 2  
*if given in the dark*, 2014.  
Ink, gouache, acrylic, sand,  
and wood, 9 x 5 1/2 x 13/16  
inches (22.8 x 14 x 2.2 cm).  
Collection of Andrea Baccin  
and Ilaria Marotta.  
Photographed by Roberto Apa.

The surfaces of Olson’s sculptures vacillate between smooth to granular. The works are often hung at corresponding heights to their referenced body parts, emphasizing their relation to the human figure. The inward curves of *Future body, cement* (p. 12), look as though the viewer could potentially insert him or herself into the work, possibly squeezing his or her legs into the pair of semicircular hollows. Many are painted a color the artist thinks of as “internal flesh,” which is also the natural color of the resin-based foam used to make them, and others are of less visceral tones. Additionally, the matte surfaces of the sculptures are light absorbent, which offers a softer counterpoint to the reflective Plexiglas enclosures of

the photographs that surround them. According to the artist, “it is often by comparison that things can be seen for what they are: soft next to rigid feels even softer, dark next to light feels even darker. . . . Things defined by their opposites, or at least by comparison.”<sup>10</sup>

Olson’s photographs take on a first-person perspective and consistently address embodiment and reflection, all the while considering proprioception, phenomenology, and performativity. She constructs these images looking directly down or at herself, often contorting her figure into the picture plane against a backdrop of amassed studio debris. Photographing her body from this vantage point, Olson seeks to “jump between an interior, direct experience and an exterior, pictured existence. By holding the camera pressed up to my face, the perspective within the images is primarily subjective, as seen through my eyes.”<sup>11</sup> And in many ways, the viewfinder functions as a prosthetic eye.

Similar to her reading of architectural space, Olson routinely thinks about our likely gendered associations with materials—leather, steel, and wood as potentially masculine; velvet, glass, and clay as possibly feminine. She aims to invert these relationships by creating seemingly androgynous or dually sexed works, which she achieves by intermixing imagery or using found objects and her sculptures as “prosthetics.” She arranges these fragments or their reflected images on her body, yet frequently the flash of the camera whites them out. For instance, in *Turned In Double Corner* (p. 18), Olson utilizes one of her corner reliefs as a vaginal edifice, articulating a sardonic commentary on the gendered psychology of space. Functioning like collages of haptic physicality, Olson’s photographs simultaneously contain her presence, as well as her absence.

Through these works, Olson builds on Kiesler’s sentiments regarding the ways in which a body, physically and experientially, relates to its architectural surroundings. For him,

visual obstacles were the most confining of all. To this end, walking and meandering around the studio Olson might pick something up only to set it down, continually searching for a relationship between her body, space, the object, and the yet-to-be-composed picture plane. From a bird’s-eye view of her work in development, one might think she is taking part in a scripted theatrical performance, yet it is all improvised. As she searches for kismet relationships through the camera’s viewfinder, each image reveals itself through slow looking, one frame at a time. As a final presentation, the artist places her images within the confines of a Plexiglas perimeter, yet they are open and faceless, as if you could step into and become part of the work—a sentiment they share with the sculptural reliefs. About the photographs’ relationship to her sculptures, Olson has said, “Since I am already thinking through the recesses in the body and containers, they function like frames, containing the body. . . . There’s a moment of stopping, a little perimeter, that delineates the space between the image and the viewer.”<sup>12</sup>

In the final section of the installation, Olson brings together a group of photographic and collaged drawing “endnotes” that relate visually and conceptually to the ideas expressed in the body of the exhibition. Their seemingly gestural, narrative qualities point to Olson’s experiences with drawing as a young artist. William J. O’Brien, who taught a ceramics class Olson attended at The Art Institute of Chicago, indicated to her that working with clay was intimately related to the practice of drawing. As Olson describes, “you can refine it, you can have it be messy, you can have it just be a draft, but it is also very much about the connection of like thought to hand and physicalization of thought formation.”<sup>13</sup> Such methodologies, which have made their way into her photographic process, allow the artist to sketch in space and translate mental imaginings into physical objects. The constellation of materials created for this section brings Olson’s practice full circle, revealing further the unpredictable nature of her process as it relates to chance and unseen elements, and allows her to collapse and condense space additionally.

In his 1962 description of the *Endless House* for the Japanese magazine *Bokubi Forum*, Kiesler articulates his vision for

creating a space in which one must, “make room and comfort for those ‘visitors’ from your own inner world . . . the ritual of meditation inspired. Truthfully, the inhabitants of your inner space are steady companions, although invisible to the naked eye, but very much felt by the psyche.”<sup>14</sup> *Forehead and Brain* is a descendent of Kiesler’s voice. Here, Olson invites the viewer take part in the act of looking—a distinct and welcoming thinking space in which to peruse and decipher the lexicon of her mind’s eye.

1. B. Ingrid Olson, email message to the author, November 9, 2017.
2. Olson, email message to the author, November 15, 2017.
3. Olson, email message to the author, November 9, 2017.
4. Olson, in conversation with the author, May 22, 2017.
5. Ibid.
6. Leslie Kanes Weisman, “The Spatial Caste System: Design for Social Inequality” in *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 81.
7. Olson, in conversation with the author, May 22, 2017.
8. Frederick J. Kiesler, *Inside the Endless House: Art, People, and Architecture—A Journal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 567.
9. Olson, in conversation with the author, May 22, 2017.
10. Olson, email message to the author, November 9, 2017.
11. Ibid.
12. Olson, in conversation with the author, May 22, 2017.
13. Ibid.
14. Kiesler, “The ‘Endless House’ A Man-Built Cosmos,” in *Frederick J. Kiesler: Selected Writings*, ed. Siegfried Gohr and Gunda Luyken (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatj, 1996), 127.