

On the Museum of Longing and Failure

*Matea Kulić in conversation with Andrew Taggart
& Chloe Lewis*

Matea Kulić: You know how, when you open new merchandise (say an IKEA shelf, or a box of pills), you find this folded up paper with conspicuous text informing you of the potential side effects or offshoots of going through with said shelf or pill? Does the MOLAF come with a warning?

Andrew Taggart & Chloe Lewis: It might. But in keeping true to the MOLAF, the paper would have to reveal a different warning with each unfolding. The first time, it would probably show a universally recognizable image of a museum with a black line through it. Like—*please don't mistake this museum for a museum!* A week later the paper may unfold to reveal Malevich's *Black Square*—a work that exists simultaneously as a composition and a non-composition—since one could say the MOLAF is both something and nothing. It has no fixed form, no fixed address, and is always working towards an understanding of what shape it can take, and how it can represent itself. The MOLAF is constantly informed by its collection, so in another instance, the warning might fold out and out and out again, until you're holding a wall-sized collection of symbols and shapes moving around the page like an animated gif.

MK: *Mmm*, it sounds kind of like a dream, and not necessarily in the romantic sense. Failure and longing often appear in my dreams as that something/nothing folding out and out and out. (I wake up sweating). Perhaps you could map the territory of longing and failure from your perspective. What, for you, continues to be at stake with these two 'slippages'?

AT/CL: About nine years ago, we found a small article in the back of a newspaper that had been left on a Toronto Island ferry. The article told the story of a man in his thirties who attempted to build a bridge from his apartment window into that of his neighbour's, and had fallen nine floors when the bridge collapsed during his crossing. We became quite fascinated by this bridge, and in how something physical, even sculptural, could manifest between the two narrative poles of the story: the desire to reach out and connect to something (in this case, a neighbour) and the failure to do so. Longing and failure became a framework for what we saw as a sculptural space of limitless interpretation and potential. It wasn't until about three years later though, in 2010, that we added a second framing mechanism to the mix—that of the museum—and the MOLAF first materialized. The Museum of Longing and Failure is fundamentally a self-questioning artistic exercise, and by calling it a museum, we could open up the conversation to other artists invested in object-based practices, and establish a parallel strand within our work that extends beyond what we make in the confines of our private studio, as two.

MK: If advertising, for instance, is preoccupied with convincing us that objects exist to satisfy our longing, is the MOLAF interested in reversing this logic, and, by doing so, shedding light on the inherent desires of objects themselves? Is there something about the MOLAF's collection that resists consumption?

AT/CL: Not necessarily. The works in the MOLAF's collection each operate under their own set of parameters, and each have the capacity to perform in a multiplicity of ways. What interest us most are the dialogues and tensions that arise as a result of this pluralism. Take the bridge from our earlier anecdote: Though it fails to perform as a connective tissue, it certainly triumphs in driving the narrative towards a compelling conclusion, and equally succeeds as an embodiment of pathos and a mirror of human subjectivity. From a less metaphorical, more animistic perspective, the bridge could also be understood purely through its materiality, as planks of wood that physically defy an individual's impulse to organize them into a preconceived structure of a bridge. This bridge then, as an object, can open up a dialogue surrounding fundamentally existential lines of inquiry, and simultaneously spark a curiosity towards the agency of objects themselves. How do longing and failure play out beyond human projection and perception? How can a sculpture express its own limits and desires? The sweating you talk about, in the night—what similar anxieties lurk within a lump of concrete, an iPhone, or a stick of cinnamon?

MK: When I look at the piece *House of Found Casino Cards* (2015) by Erica Stocking and Christian Kliegel, I see a deck of cards captured in a moment of striving. The cards appear as if they would like to break

out of the stack. The bulge and fray might occur on a molecular level, but I can't help but observe this indication of time past as a signal of my own decay. Are we fated to misrecognize the requests and longings of objects?

AT/CL: In all likelihood, yes. But the piece you mention by Erica Stocking and Christian Kliegel gives us a hint in its title: not simply *Found Casino Cards*, but *House of Found Casino Cards*. This title suggests the cards ultimately see themselves as a grand, meticulously constructed house of cards, rather than a simple stack. It also tells us the cards are "found," and that they originate from various casinos (that happen to be in Vancouver). So from here we could possibly assume the cards were cast aside when they failed to generate any winnings. We could even go on to infer that, conceivably, as a result of this failure, the cards are collectively permeated with an aura of loss and frustration, perhaps even on a molecular level. But who knows? Fundamentally, one can only speculate.

MK: That the title *hints* at how the objects might see themselves brings up the question of the position of the artist in framing the work. In works such as Heidi Nagtegaal's *Needle* (2007) and Dillan Marsh's *Trophy* (2015), there seems to be an impulse to assist a failing object, or even to comfort it. How do you see the role of the artist within the triad of object-viewer-artist?

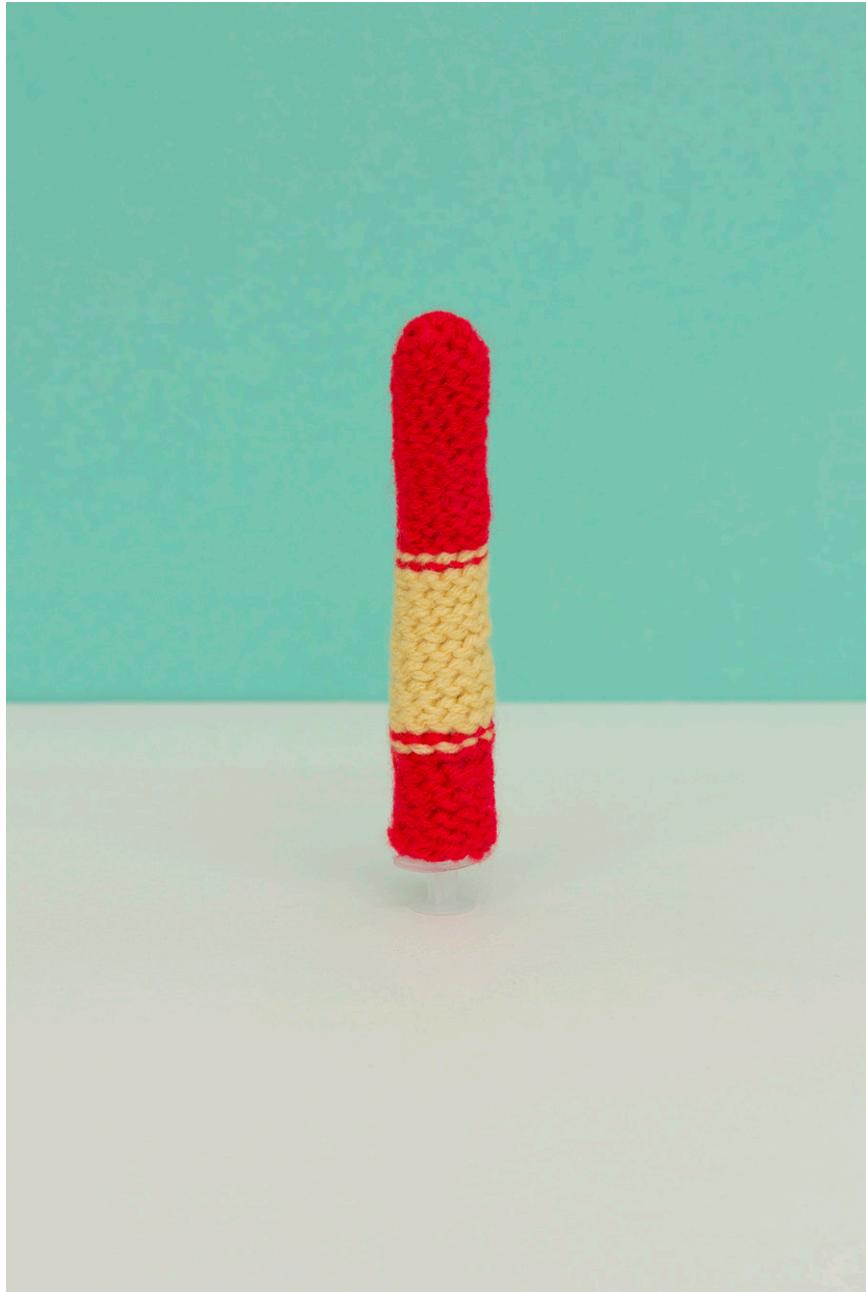
AT/CL: That's an interesting question, but one that we're hesitant to answer, especially in relation to the MOLAF, because it risks closing down the conversation at play between the artists, and also between the

objects. When inviting artists to contribute a work to the MOLAF, we ask only that they make a new, object-based work with the museum in mind. The one restriction we impose is a maximum physical measurement: 20 x 20 x 20 cm. Other than scale though, we have few expectations, and never ask artists to explain their contribution. In most cases, the artwork arrives in the mail a few months after the initial invitation, with very little conversation in the interim. We trust artists to create something through a sensitivity to the resonance of the material world, and, whenever possible, avoid mediating the objects in the collection, or speaking on the artists' behalf. What we can say is that we hope to work with the MOLAF for the rest of our lives, and consequently, have begun to consider its long-term trajectory. Objects, after all, exist in a very different timeframe than human beings, and the MOLAF's collection is likely to exponentially outlive its contributors. We're curious about the theoretical possibility of a future in which the MOLAF and the artists (ourselves included) are indistinguishable, thus establishing a true collective authorship, or perhaps a kind of post-authorship. At this immeasurable limit, we can also imagine a coalescence of object and spectator, in which the artworks can converse and co-exist without the pressure of external viewership.

MK: In a recent retrospective talk by Liz Magor, she insists on the materiality of the object within her sculptural practice: "It isn't *about* something, it *is* something." The works in the MOLAF's collection, however, are represented virtually. Is your positioning of the objects out of time and space (against abstract backdrops, in cyberspace) an attempt to confront us with the fundamental distance preexisting between ourselves and objects, or the very existence of the object itself?



Erica Stocking & Christian Kliegel, *House of Found Casino Cards*, 2015
39 found playing cards: 30 Grand Villa Casino, 5 Edgewater Casino,
3 Great Canadian Casinos, 1 Joker; elastic band
3 x 7 x 9 cm



Heidi Nagtegaal, *Needle*, 2007 (acquired in 2010)
Yarn, syringe
15 x 3 x 3 cm



Dillan Marsh, *Trophy*, 2015
Marble, dumbbell spanner, chocolate wrapper
13 x 6 x 6 cm



Nadia Belerique, *Feet, Face, Dick, Stab*, 2015
Steel
32 x 13 x 0.3 cm

AT/CL: The works in the MOLAF's collection can be experienced both physically and virtually, as can Liz Magor's work, so we don't agree that the issue of "real/virtual" necessarily serves as a point of distinction between Magor and the MOLAF. In fact, we'd love to have a work by Magor in the collection, and certainly don't believe that archiving it online would diminish its material insistence. Several works in the collection demand a resolute material ontology, while others function more symbolically or referentially. However, as a framing mechanism that unites the artworks as a collective body, the MOLAF itself operates quite differently. The website serves to assert the existence of the objects, but as you suggest, also activates a distance between the object and the viewer, and between the object and its original context. With respect to the experience of art, we're interested in questions of accessibility and alienation, and the online archive is just one of the platforms through which these questions play out. So in answer to your question, yes, there's definitely a deliberate gap between how the objects are encountered in the physical world and how they're experienced online, where they typically float, dislocated.

MK: With respect to our relationship with objects, it seems that a gap opens up as a function of language. What might we need to grasp in order to move closer to the object (and consequently our own objecthood), that we don't have a word for? Could there be a hint, say, in the amalgamation of words in Nadia Belerique's *Feet, Face, Dick, Stab* (2015)?

AT/CL: It's a beautiful postulation that a key to a deepened understanding of objects could lie in Belerique's title. Its attitude is one

that we relate to entirely: it shape shifts, resists a conventional sense of ontological uniformity and continuity, and suggests movement through its play of words, commas, and pauses. As a title, *Feet, Face, Dick, Stab* also hints at a kind of linguistic crossover, in which its elements are equivalent and interchangeable. This inclination towards a fluidity and democracy of both language and form is, as you propose, the basis for a paradigm that is only just being defined.

MK: Since we first met in Vancouver last year, you've been to Norway, Newfoundland, and Berlin. I understand the MOLAF travels with you. Does it sometimes refuse to behave, thus becoming a rebellious object itself? I wonder to what and where the MOLAF might be currently scheming....

AT/CL: The MOLAF can certainly be elusive at times, and a bit restless. So far, it's made appearances in Bergen, Copenhagen, New York City, Dawson City, Kraków, Leipzig, Trondheim, Vancouver, and Amfissa (Greece), and it sometimes strives towards more far-flung places, like Bethlehem and Tahiti. The first book we published through the museum, *MOLAF Variations* (2015), addresses this restlessness in another way, by asking: What if the MOLAF no longer wants to be the MOLAF? What would it want to be? Over the course of the book, the acronym MOLAF is reformulated again and again in an exhaustive attempt at reinvention. It's essentially an exercise in constrained writing, and goes back to the idea of a museum with no fixed form.

MOLAF Variations proposes that the Museum of Longing and Failure could just as easily be the Museum of Lubricants and Fingerprints, the Museum of Limitlessly Accessible Funds, or the Museum of Looped Atonal Frequencies, etc. We're currently giving a lot of thought to the direction of the museum's publishing component. *MOLAF Variations* opened up a host of possibilities for other print-based explorations: *MOLAF Revelations*, *MOLAF Hesitations*, *MOLAF Approximations*, *MOLAF Speculations*, *MOLAF Commiserations*....It's a whirlingly endless exercise, just like the MOLAF itself.

The Museum of Longing and Failure is an artistic platform established in 2010 by Canadian artists Andrew Taggart and Chloe Lewis. The museum takes shape through a sustained conversation with international contemporary artists and collectives, whose contributed works form the basis of ongoing installations, interventions, and, more recently, the production of new forms. To date, the MOLAF has presented the work of over seventy artists through sixteen installments, and has appeared internationally through cooperations with institutions such as Cricoteka, Kraków, Poland; Parks Canada, Dawson City, Yukon; and The Institute for Endotic Research, Berlin, Germany.

Images courtesy of the Museum of Longing and Failure