



WORKS BY: Tony Lewis with Bethany Collins, Devin T. Mays & Ellen Rothenberg

Artists' Discussion

Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society

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Tony Lewis: Bethany, my first question would be this: When people walk into the show, they kind of see the floor drawing that I've got, and they kind of see it as the foundation for this show, right? It's the thing that's on the floor. A lot of things are touching it, but in my experience and my understanding, the foundation of this show came out of a conversation between you and [Neubauer Collegium Curator] Dieter [Roelstraete], and that's sort of where I first heard about it. So part of me is curious how that conversation went, what it was like talking about a conversation about work. The work that you have in the show is entitled *Erased: (Unrelated)*, right? It's a photograph of chalk, chalk dust. It's like a 42 by 42 frame, right? Is that work what you were thinking of initially when we were talking about making the show or was it something else? And generally, how do you think about the idea of work as it relates to your own practice in relationship to the show? Big questions, I know.

Bethany Collins: Big questions. Dieter and I had a really lovely studio visit. Is this 2024? So this was 2023. And talking about ideas of labor and work. I think of my practices oriented towards repetition and tedium. I know it's getting good when I'm repeating something *ad nauseam* until it transforms. So that's my own vantage point towards the labor. I don't think we picked the work in that initial visit. It actually is a work – the piece in the show is from 2012, 2013... It's a piece that I made after grad school. And the show allowed me to kind of think back towards that process and the tentacles of all of those early works that are still in the current work. But I actually think of that chalk dust piece as an aftermath of labor and tedious, laborious, repetitive processes. I think what's nice about the pairing of these works and the grounding of your work in the show is that it is the revealing of the process. You never get to see the performance by which my works are made. You have to trust that they were incredibly, obsessively preoccupied with something, but the evidence of that is not always visible, and you're making it quite visible in the first two weeks of the show. Right?

TL: Absolutely.

BC: Yeah, do you want to talk about that, the process of making that or overseeing the making of it?

TL: Sure, briefly. I'll be as brief as I can. So for the show, it's like one of the things I put in is a floor drawing; it's the thing that's on the floor. Typically when those things are made, they're made prior to the show opening. I've been making those for about 13 years. This is the 11th version of this, and it's the first time we started making this drawing on the same day that the show started, which presents a lot of issues for a lot of reasons. The only— the main reason why I agreed to do this is because I knew I would be able to spend time with and hang out with Devin, who agreed to be a part of this and agreed to sort of be in that space and activate my work and his work at the same time, which definitely made it easier for me to consider, "All right, from a conceptual standpoint, I'm just not doing this out of some sense of just, whatever. There's an imperative here. There's a requirement that needs to be met to a certain degree."

And so that made it easier. And it was an idea that I brought to Dieter. Dieter said, "This seems like a great idea. Let's try it and see if it fails." But I think ultimately the first couple of weeks were basically, Let's start this process. We did some prep work prior, but essentially the moment that the show opened is the moment that we put graphite to the floor, and then the show had begun where your [Bethany Collins's] work was actually just outside the space. Ellen's work was installed right out here in the courtyard. And so there was a presence of everybody around. It was just sort of in this deconstructive sort of way that made way for this kind of process of just straight-up labor that I don't want to call performative, because to me what we were doing was just making a drawing, but I can't deny the context of how performative work and performance in general might be a part of that conversation. But to me it was just, this is what we have to do to make a drawing.

And so I had two weeks, as part of a show, to make a drawing and put that, shed some light on that, give some eyes on that and have it be something people can see and experience and kind of be confused about it.

BC: Can I ask two follow-ups? I have two follow-ups. Why Devin's work? What felt urgent in Devin's work to be in conversation with for this show? And then why do you resist, because I do as well, anything performative... I get a lot of suggestions about, "Ooh, because your work is so labor based, you should do this as a performance," and I will never, I will never. So, why do you resist performance?

TL: Right.

BC: Never.

TL: Well, the first question, Devin, because he's from Detroit. That's the only reason.

BC: That's not the only reason.

Devin T. Mays: That's a good reason.

TL: [Laughs] That's not the only reason. But no, there's an absolute – I have a tremendous amount of respect and awe and wonder around Devin's work: the ease with which he's able to kind of go in and out of context, go in and out of work, perform work, do work, not perform work, and it still appears as weight, staged, not staged. There's a real beauty to that, that it's more of a reality to his life. And for me, I have a huge separation between art and reality. So, I don't really enjoy the idea of art-making in a performative sense because performance is too close to reality for me. So Devin's interesting because he's able to create a world of art-making that encapsulates both of these things simultaneously, seamlessly. And so yeah, that kind of answers both questions I think.

BC: Yeah.

DM: I know.

TL: Devin could hate all this.

DM: No, this is interesting hearing... everybody's introduction to the work, the practice and the show. It's funny, I'm thinking about when I first met Bethany, I think I had just finished grad school actually.

BC: Yeah.

DM: It's like 2015, 2016.

BC: Years ago.

DM: Wow. And remembering that work that's in the show, you actually presenting on it at a lecture at the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago. And then I think I met Tony just a few years before that, I want to say. And then Ellen is somebody that I met because of Dieter's introduction, knew of you and the work. And so the actual conversations about how all these things kind of came together, I was imagining for a long time how things would look, but I didn't know how they would be. And I think when Tony had reached out, I was in town from Texas for a couple of days. And I think the thing that Tony was really interested in was, "I really would like your work to engage with mine in a more kind of direct, physical way." And the thing that I thought was the most interesting about that was, at least we spoke about this during that time, was there were very few opportunities for artworks to be able to touch each other in a very specific way.

And I really, really was open to... what happens when I give away – not even give away – but the concern is actually kind of a touch, a shared touch, a shared

– not shared space in a kind of institutional practical way, but... we have similar stakes, which is the ground, which is the floor.

And that really got me excited about the idea of simultaneous work. So the thing that I said to Tony was, While you're prepping for the floor drawing to be made, I could be prepping outside for things to come inside at some point, and maybe not everything, but maybe there could be kind of this ongoing thing happening, which you don't need a kind of... Things are always happening simultaneously, I guess. But I think it was nice to have an exhibition as a guide... to offer some sort of... to know where to situate the happening that is happening all the time. And that's how the pallets became part of the work. It was—

TL: And I see you looking them, at the blank space.

DM: I know. I keep doing that. [Laughs.]

TL: I mean, the story around what happens with the pallets, it's literally in conversation with Ellen's work because they both occupy the same space at the same time. Like I said in the talk, Ellen was smart enough to place the work to the wall and high enough so nobody could get to it.

DM: That's true.

TL: Whereas the pallets have their own – one of the most interesting things about this exhibition happened outside of the gallery, given the state of the context and all that stuff. But it has to do with these pallets. I don't know if you want to talk about that at all.

DM: No, sure. I can talk about it briefly. The idea that I had mentioned to both you [Tony Lewis] and Dieter at the time, we [referring to Bethany Collins and Ellen Rothenberg] hadn't spoken just yet about what work was going into the show. But I remember saying that there's this work with pallets that I am really interested in and I like to kind of source them from wherever, the place I'm working. And so for about a week and a half I would say, I was just kind of going around Chicago trying to gather pallets. And it's a little more than dumpster diving. It's this asking for permission or an invitation to gather these things. So one of the things I would do is go to various buildings not too far from the Collegium, and I would see that there were stacks of pallets inside some of these more, I'll say commercial buildings on campus. And so after a series of asks, I gather the pallets, would drop them off, arrange them, stack them – and some of the arrangement in the stack was meant for them to be there as if they're prepared to do something, not being asked to do anything.

So even using things like shims or using wedges to offer balance to the stack is important for me. And I remember the biggest thing we were talking about is like, Well, would somebody know that there was art on the lawn? Which I was

OK with that being a part of the work, having to deal with that. There's a good possibility someone might throw these things away. I never had the idea that maybe they would be used for an encampment not too far from campus. So, I think when I got the phone call from Dieter after the small preview of the show opening, my expectation was actually that the facilities just came by and took everything, not that they were being picked up and repositioned somewhere, elsewhere for a different kind of purpose and use.

TL: They were working in another way.

DM: They were working in another way, which I found to be really quite interesting. I had a mix of emotions being like, it is something to kind of watch the time that it takes. Some of these things were gathered in Houston, some of them were gathered here, and then five days later for them to no longer be there. And so the markings of where they were became important for me. And I was actually working on a letter – I don't think I told anybody this – I was working on a letter that I was going to ask to be delivered to the people of the encampment. Nothing else, just to be more in direct dialogue with them as opposed to having this kind of passive... something happened to these things and it just became something else. Like, no, I'm actually happy – it makes me feel better to know that we are kind of in dialogue actually.

And the letter was going to simply say that, "Would you be OK if I actually tell people the work has just been moved somewhere else, i.e. the Quad?" And the next morning I got an email and a text from Dieter saying that the encampment had been raided and there's videos of the pallets being thrown away in the dumpster. I had friends looking in the dumpster to see if they can identify and pull out the pallets, but then the dumpsters were being guarded.

Fast forward, that's when actually Ellen had mentioned to me that she had pictures of some of the pallets from that moment. And it felt like the world around the work, which is how I describe usually the practices, my things become ways to ground myself for other things to happen around it, around the work. And this is no better example. I think probably the pallets were just a kind of a way to enter this kind of discussion. And that's when you [referring to Ellen] had said, "Hey, actually I have pictures of the pallets if you want them." So yeah, I don't know. I really appreciate that. That also is the life of the work, the extension of the work: the myth around if I saw the pallet or not, or when you saw the pallet, maybe you saw it here, maybe you saw it on the Quad. I like that, that was actually something offered to the work too.

Ellen Rothenberg: I saw it in the paper.

DM: Yeah.

ER: It was in the *New York Times*.

DM: Not listed as the work, but listed as something else.

TL: It wasn't technically the original but it was... [Interviewees laugh.]

DM: All of it was trash for sure. But no, but it's interesting because I was thinking about how photography works in your [Ellen's] work actually. It's in the show right now and the documentation of the aftermath of the exhibition.

ER: Yes.

DM: And it's interesting that what you found to be interesting was the aftermath of what happened to my work. And so yeah, if you could actually talk about how the documentation of the aftermath is kind of what – or how that kind of came to be the work that's in there right now.

ER: I think the first time I saw the pallets was in an image that Dieter sent me of Rick Lowe standing behind the stack of pallets and speaking, or giving a kind of public salute. My work is public-facing, and I was happy for the opportunity to install a large-scale work on the building's facade, to be in conversation with all of you, to be in conversation with a public that might be part of the university, and the larger community around the institution. Having my work installed adjacent to the pallets and alongside the street was important.

DM: The work banner you were describing–

ER: Yeah, the banner, *Work Metric*, the large boot.

DM: Yeah.

ER: I was the last artist to be included in the exhibition. I had come down to talk to Dieter about the Gelitin show. He mentioned Tony, Devin, and Bethany's participation in an upcoming show on labor. The next week I went to California and coincidentally saw Tony's work at the Orange County Museum. And it made me think of an image that I had taken at MoMA of Barbara Kruger's large installation, which had been presented at the Art Institute, but then had been reinstalled at MoMA.

I happened to be at MoMA on that day crossing the bridge over the atrium and saw this mass of paper, dumpsters, forklifts, and brooms. Having just finished a five-year curatorial project on labor at the School of the Art Institute, I was focused on issues of invisible labor... I didn't think about that photograph as something I was going to print and show, but I was intrigued with the silence of the image of the atrium because Barbara Kruger's work is very loudly voiced and the image was quiet and there was no activity – all of the workers were on break. And it was a moment, it was a note to self. When Dieter came to my studio, I probably wouldn't have picked that image to show him, but I printed it and yeah, he went for it.

DM: Yeah.

BC: Why not that image? I love that image—

TL: I think it's the right one.

BC: Because it's also aftermath and residue.

TL: It's like the right one—

BC: Yeah.

TL: In terms of all of these things—

BC: I love that image.

TL: Especially to hear you talk about it. But yeah, go ahead.

BC: So why weren't you thinking that one would work?

ER: I think because I've been working on the fly a lot because I've been moving around between Berlin and Chicago, and I shot it with my cellphone.

BC: It's so good.

ER: Photography on the fly has become an accumulation of notes to self. After returning, I had some time and started printing images and there was something about it that said, "Yeah, print me." I saw Devin's performance at the Renaissance Society just weeks before the show. I was intrigued by the formality of the work, the benches, which were minimalist sculpture, but also the sound, which was a spoken description of space, and everybody was sitting and listening to a description of space through multiple speakers. And Bethany, I encountered your work first in a show that we were in together during the pandemic. I was very intrigued by your use of language. Participating in *WORKS BY* was an opportunity to meet all of you and to be in a conversation with you and your work.

TL: Likewise.

ER: It was exciting to consider an exhibition that was going to happen quickly. It had a low budget and a certain kind of intimacy. You talk about the phrase "touching each other," and I thought it was unlike any other group show. I was curious to hear several colleagues, friends who are photography scholars, comment on the exhibition: "It's a sculpture show." And I was like, "Really?" And there was a long pause and they said, "It's like... it's an installation. All of the work is speaking to each other." I think in addition to touching each other, that

production of a new work by touch, by adjacency, by these ideas coming together, was something that continues to be compelling.

DM: It's funny, I would say that... even though that they were, let's say for example, Bethany's work must be a kind of anchor for the show, it wasn't literally touching the floor or the ground that became your [Tony's] floor drawing. But to activate the floor, the walls feel different. If the ground was just kind of the ground as it would be in the Neubauer, then I think the idea of things touching... this other kind of intimate, shared space would feel different. They were just kind of four or five things that were discrete art moments in the room. But there's something about the floor that then made the wall feel like, "Well, yeah, well—"

TL: I mean, it was a messy process in the beginning when the show first was put up. It was just very, very haphazard. So I think it kind of dispelled any idea of any sort of discreteness. It was like, No, no, you have to touch this. You have to get in here. Even if you want to try to get in here, because we had that barrier at the beginning of the show... With the barrier, you could peek through. And if you wanted to actually perform a little bit and help make the drawing, you could step through, cover yourself up, and then you rub the floor with a rag that's soaked in graphite powder.

So it's like that sets the stage already of a kind of de-cleansing in a lot of ways, or sort of like a reverse purification process. It makes it so everything kind of has to touch. Bodies walking in there have to touch. It sort of sets that. It makes it so everybody walking in there, no matter what, you're implicated already. You're doing the thing you're not supposed to do in a show: you're touching the art. There's nothing you can do about it.

ER: You're walking on it.

TL: Because you're walking on it, because of gravity. You cannot physically go to see the show without touching the work.

BC: You like that.

TL: It's interesting to me because I think on a conceptual level, it gets to – I think what – I like many things about it, but from the perspective of the audience, I think it's interesting to give, to put forth an opportunity to participate in a really weird way. There's a sort of a weird sense of participation. A lot of people walking in that space are like, "Oh, I'm helping you make this drawing." I'm like, "You're not. But if you think you are, then that's great," because to a certain extent there is a little bit of that.

And I guess one of the things that I wanted to get to is – I don't know how much time we got left – but one of the things I did want to get to is, if we can, I feel like this is too big of a concept to show the idea of work. The way that it... sort

of manifests in four different ways is insurmountable and it's like the way we've been talking. We've already done it, right? We've described how work sort of falls into our bodies of work a little bit. But if we could boil it down to a few keywords or key phrases or ideas or a couple sentences, what would that look like for each of us? I know that's a tough thing, but maybe even use the show as an example.

ER: I'm going to resist.

TL: That's a great form of work. [Interviewees laugh.] I think that's a great response. One hundred percent, I get it.

ER: Because you were talking about performance earlier, and I felt that what happened across the timeline of the exhibition... and this refers to Dieter's reference to Hannah Arendt's quote, her ideas of work, labor, action... the reveal of the people working on the floor drawing in hazmat suits outfitted with masks, goggles, and gloves in the gallery for weeks, a view made available to gallery visitors through a kind of porthole. The process wasn't trivial. It wasn't a performance. It was heavy labor and it was labor with risk... Then the flip side, the floor has been vacuumed. We have booties on and we're sliding across this beautiful surface and polishing it, which is, maybe, another kind of group labor.

And the challenge of the Neubauer gallery – I've seen so many great shows here – but instead of a white cube, it's an exhibition space with a giant concrete fireplace mantle and floor-to-ceiling paneled walls. I was astonished by the power of Bethany's photograph to hold its own on that wall.

TL: One hundred percent, yeah.

ER: The expanse of Tony's detailed floor drawing was a quiet and powerful platform for the exhibition. And then these tiny gestures of the removed pallets, like the orange Post-It notes, became this very, very subtle note to the removal, the absence that occurred throughout Devin's participation... I think there's a lot of really strong ideas in the show.

TL: I agree.

DM: That's a... Oh.

TL: You got the last word.

DM: Yeah, no, I was going to say... it's interesting. I think being in this show too, has had me think a lot about being mindful of not using the words "work" and "labor" interchangeably, which I think happens often. And I've been trying to sit with that a little bit. What is work, what is labor? And maybe the only thing I can come up with at the moment is to say that, or suggest that, maybe work is a formalized labor in a sense that I think my body is always – there's a labor that is

required for me to sit here and talk that I don't require – that I wouldn't call work. But then there's a thing that I ask my body to do with very specified intention that then begins to feel like work.

So, I would like to think that maybe the idea of *WORKS BY* is a kind of formalized labor that happens when you make a photograph or you make a drawing, you make a sculpture, when you kind of carry things from one place to the other. But then there's this other labor that happens around the work that then kind of informs... whatever those formalized gestures are, or maybe they become another formalized gesture from the outside labor that happens, whether it's...

I remember, it's funny you mentioned actually, Ellen, the idea that every time I kept showing up, things kept disappearing. [Interviewees laugh.] You know what I mean? It was actually kind of wild.

BC: Did you say that?

DM.: It was like, I had pallets out here. And it was like, "Damn, now the pallets are gone." And then when we moved the pallets after two weeks—

TL: You had the imprint inside.

DM: We had the imprint inside. And I remember Tony and I spent five or six hours inside of the gallery being like, "This is amazing that the marks from when we moved the pallets from one side of the room to the other left similar marks from when the pallets were removed for the use of the encampment." And they were like, "What do we do about that?"

TL: I don't think we got paid for that work actually. [Interviewees laugh.]

DM: We were like, "What do we do about that? This is really beautiful and interesting, but I don't make drawings." And Tony was like, "Well, this is actually something else on top of this drawing. It's not my drawing, so I don't fix things, but there's a possibility if you want this thing to stay, you might have to fix it. This is going to disappear."

And so we had a long conversation about being like, "All right, Dev, something else you made is probably going to disappear by the halfway point of the reception. And I think it was actually – it became part of the conversation around what Dieter kept getting at is the effort that goes into something. And then the evidence of that effort: Is it tied up in the documentation? Is it tied up in the mythology of the stories that we tell and retell? Or having to just be OK with the fact that something I make might disappear. No one will ever know what happened. And yeah, and I think some of the labor that happens from the work that I make is actually having to deal with that. You know what I mean? That whatever the emotional, whatever the egotistical kind of attachment I

have to the work immediately has to be dealt with when I allow the labor outside of the work to happen.

BC: So, I'm getting back to what you're saying by talking about myself. I'm often creating a system of rules that I can follow so that I do not have to be conductor of the orchestra. I can abdicate what will happen, the formal outcome of the work, and I wonder if you are as well – if there's some sort of desire for the work to exist beyond you, that you're actually finding pleasure in –

DM: That I do want the thing to exist or do not?

BC: Don't. That you would actually like it all to disappear.

DM: Oof... I think there is something for me that I feel good about knowing that it can disappear, actually... It's an interesting kind of tension that it's like, I can put a lot of care and want to live with the thing and also know that this thing may not be around for very long. You know what I mean? The thing that I make or the efforts of the work might not exist much longer than they need to; whatever that time is may be not just up to me, but up to other things outside of me. But I think that helps me with practice.

It allows me to feel like I'm never worried about what to do next actually. It feels like, the fact that I know this thing can disappear, and maybe sometimes should, helps me to understand that it's not just my responsibility for this thing to exist here or elsewhere, which I think gives me a little bit more... makes me feel better about being in the practice and maybe kind of leaning away from being overly concerned with exhibitionism. It's very much a practice about practice in a way. And so I think that's just actually kind of what refuels the, I guess the next kind of motivation to do something else or move something else maybe. Not for it to disappear, but to be like, I want this thing to be around. I also know it might disappear, which is trying to hold space for both of those things to be true, if that makes sense. I don't know if that makes sense.

BC: In your Libra way, it did. It did.

DM: It's a very Libra thing to say but it's true.....

ER: Another thing that's notable is the formalism in everyone's practice in this group, but there's also this kind of intrusion of – I mean, OK... whether it's the layering of the work and what it does together, or the way in which the events from outside impacted what happened inside, and the radicality of doing something quickly, very economically, and about process, revealed different aspects of everyone's work in a provocative way.

DM: Can I also just say, I really like thinking about dust when it comes to both of your works, actually.

TL: We can talk about that.

ER: Dust?

DM: Dust. I think I didn't—

ER: And yours too, because of the shadow.

DM: Yeah... There's something about the significance of dust that feels really, really interesting in a way that I don't think I initially anticipated to be a thing that I was thinking about in a literal way. It was literal dust in this room being kicked around as a picture of dust. Dust, actually—

ER: Dust was being vacuumed.

DM: Dust was doing a lot of stuff.

ER: Dust was toxic. Dust was...

DM: You know what I mean?

TL: Yeah.

DM: It really, yeah. I don't know, I don't have a kind of complete thought about it, but I like having to think about dust when thinking about work that actually feels really, really good.

ER: Or materiality.

TL: Yeah.

DM: Yeah.

ER: I mean, the materiality of everyone's work was present in different ways.

BC: Can I say something about Ellen's piece before we finish? The one on the back, the one on the back of the... the chair piece.

DM: Oh, yes.

BC: On the back of the Kruger piece. So, the older – I'm turning 40 this year – and the older I'm getting, talking about labor, the less I want to wrestle with the gods for an idea, or maybe angels... like, pull it down from the heavens. I have less interest in that. That used to be my form of labor, the hardest thing I had to do. But I am still really enjoying – and this is where I think your piece on the back flips the script of how I'm thinking about labor – I'm still really enjoying that once the idea has come, the angels have kissed me with an idea, that my

job is just to make and my brain can go blank. And my job and my pleasure is to just do the tedious thing over and over again.

I think there's some kind of shared sensibility in that piece on the back that it's not about the works that were made from the artistic life. It's the wearing – it's the life of the artist. It's not the heroic masterpieces that were made. It's the hours of reflection, and probably frustration, and wrestling with the gods for an idea, and then the ecstasy of when it comes, and then you start the whole fucking thing again. It's that. But the focus, then – the labor is not the work, it's the life. And I just am enjoying thinking about that piece.

TL.: One hundred percent. It reminds me of the wear and tear of the shoe and the banner outside here. That was a work shoe, right?

ER: Yes.

TL: That has memory. I think memory is a big part of what you're talking about—

BC: Yeah.

TL: The repetition to be able to sort of... I love what you say about the idea of just pulling from heavens versus just being able to sit still and just do the work in a way that's like, "All right, this is what my body has time for," and it's the grinding out... But also, for me, it reflects a little bit in the work that's outside because it's such a clear indication of an object, of a moment, of a memory, of history, private albeit. But it's still something that I see, that wear and tear that you're discussing. I see it in both works.

ER: And I think that there's... one of Dieter's questions was around physical exertion, right, as labor? And of course, I saw it in the moving of the pallets where everyone was recruited, including [Dieter's son] Isidor, to hold a pallet as it was going through, and, "Could someone lift it? You better help him. I don't think he could lift it." But I'm also thinking about all that time that we sit in whatever workspace we have, our studios, right? And we're just looking, and – I think this may be a pre-angel moment – but we're looking and we're looking and we're looking. Then we have to go out and take a walk because we can't look anymore, but then we come back and... So that kind of labor, what is that? It's something that we share in all different ways.