



A conversation with Aram Lee

## FROM PROPS TO OBJECTS

From Props to Objects is a filmed performance commissioned for the exhibition *Landscape with Bear*. The work focuses on objects from the institution's Collection (Unintended) and shows five performers interacting with props from performances that took place throughout De Appel's history.

**Can you tell us a little bit more about this work and the intention behind it?**

*From Props to Objects* is a project about De Appel's Collection (Unintended)—artworks and other objects that have assembled in the archive throughout the institution's history. Some of them were left behind after a performance or an exhibition, or sent back to the artists but returned to their senders.

During the performance, we aimed to think together about these objects—a performance script and an airplane, green tissue paper, a cardboard wheel with a map and an empty frame—that have unintentionally gathered in the institution. They are Guiseppe Chiari's *Art is Easy* (1979), Steffan Soreff's *The Flying Eye* (1981), Sung Hwan Kim's *Pushing Against the Air* (2007), My Barbarian's *Voyage of the White Widow* (2007) and Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries' empty frame from a work that was sold at an auction in 2009. These are all props, not only as the supporting actors in a given art piece but also as substitutional moments of time and poetical fragments.

The Collection (Unintended) of De Appel contains hundreds of different objects: from props, documentations and letters to paintings, mail art and installations. How did you make the selection of which pieces to work with?

I focused on the unintended condition of the Collection. Even though the institution kept these objects with no particular narrative or categories in mind, there is an unintentional intention. The art (act) of collecting is deeply related to power systems—



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it always ascribes a certain context, meaning and another identity to the object. This process is embedded in its character, yet also an empty frame that could be thrown away.

The character of props is such that they can not be the main protagonists: they are secondary objects. That was the reason for me to choose props and leftovers that De Appel didn't acquire intentionally, because these things are mostly not that important and precious and don't speak as artworks usually do.

The fate of props is related to this unintentional structure, as they don't have a voice. De Appel as an art institution accumulated many objects yet to be understood, since they did not have the resources or processes in place of a museum collection. But these unruly props somehow attain another status, as I mentioned before—as substitutional moments of time or poetical fragments. For example, the green tissue paper we included was used as a backdrop during the performance *Pushing Against the Air* by Sung Hwan Kim in 2007 about the inspiration behind love songs. Fantastical stories are illustrated on these props.

**You were interested in the transformation of objects from props to artworks. Do you think this work achieves that kind of transformation? How? Why is this important?**

Performing in a theatre is a metaphorical structure. Bringing objects out of the depot in De Appel and under the stage lights is a way of generating and filling their untold or empty stories.

When they moved to the stage it changed the status of the objects, not only conceptually, but also physically. The performers were able to handle the objects in a new way and place pieces under different conditions.

Props are not independent, they are subordinate to the description of an archive and a narrative. But in this situation the concentration was on the materiality itself: they gain the potential to become independent objects.

**Can you talk more about the role of collaboration in this work in connection to how you usually work?**

I am interested in activating static things or uncovering the unregistered and the unknown. I usually used to work with objects by reconnecting broken sequences, extending the timeline of static pieces. It makes me reshape the complex trajectories of objects. De Appel's archive was interesting for me because its collection was assembled without clear intentions. Within this collection I was figuring out how the unruly, unedited objects could fit together.

I felt a dissonance in the way the objects collaborate in the archive. Even though the institution named it Collection (Unintended), it has a frame and it is a cooperation of objects gathered in one place. I wanted to add a second layer, the collaboration between people, so the performer's collaboration was sort of a metaphor of learning to be together that aimed to question the intentions of the collection and needed to be triggered by it.



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Five performers worked together with five props. Each prop comes from a different time from De Appel's history between 1979 and 2009, and the work is a way to

recontextualise the moments represented in the objects. The performers produced one sequence (as a new archive structure) out of the props. Collaboration has an important role in producing politics of the archive as a generator of misunderstanding, tolerance, etc.

### **Did you give the performers a script?**

I didn't prepare a script but a set of triggers—the performers moved the props from one thought to another, from one space to another, creating layers. They produced a new map for a new moment. I worked with performers as mediators to activate the objects and become generators to deliver the archive's physical narratives with their bodies. This improvised fluid reaction on objects could break the fixed and constructed identity of the object in the archive; these were deviant actions as another way to unlearn the archive. The speculation from people working together with the archive generated a completely different reality. The performers were instructed not to search for a certain truthful character of objects, but rather to perform their speculative identity.

**At the same time, there is a sense of structure in the video — the performers are in sync, they act together and discuss the props in a way that seems very natural to them as a group. How did you choose them and how were they prepared before filming the piece? What outcomes did you expect? Did anything unexpected come from this?**

Before the performance, I asked them to make one sequence together out of five different ones. There was a desire for tolerance. The performers had to work together and struggle with each other and with their own interpretation to make one sequence at the end. The tolerance is related to the understanding of the archive, which contains various species and objects. I applied these structures to the performers in the work.

What I found interesting when watching the performance was that they started with individual reactions to objects, which created dissensus, then it incrementally transformed to harmonious interaction.



### **How do the different chronologies of each prop relate to each other and the work as a whole?**

The props and the different timelines attached to them are not merged with each other, but maintain their own singular narrative in one performative sequence as woven fragments. They are framed by their history, but we didn't follow the historical narrative; rather, we explored the possibility of adopting a contemporary response. We can leave a trace on the objects, but history still inscribes itself on their bodies. That was part of the intention, in order to be able to go beyond their factual status and to regain another current dimension.

### **What decisions did you make in editing of this work?**

I tried not to edit much because it was not a scripted sequence. The camera frame was focused not on the props, but the scene of contacts between performers and objects, such as unpacking, appearing, staring, touching, blowing, tapping, disturbing them. The objects went back to the archive with a different status.