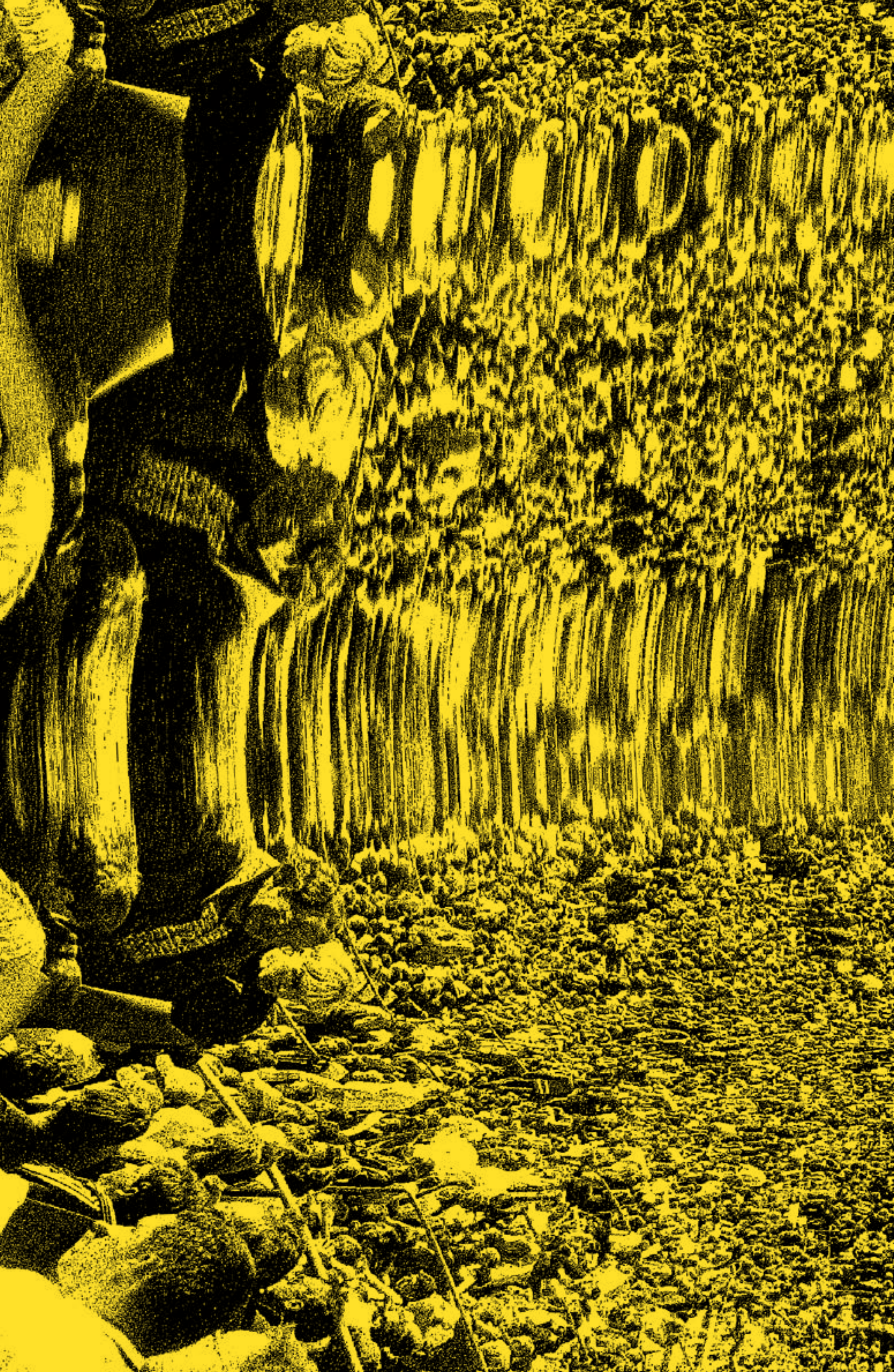
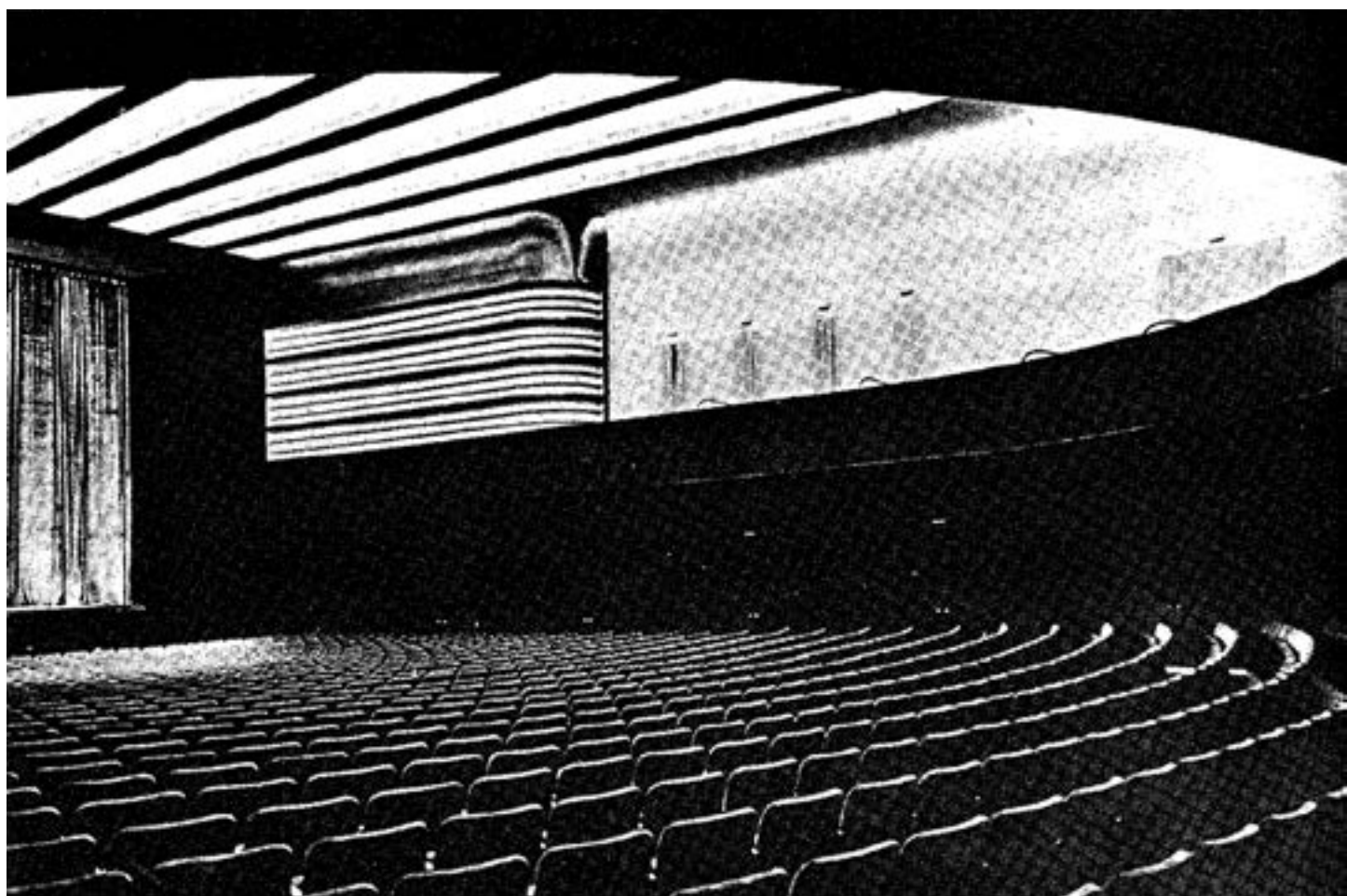


EASY LISTENING



Nikita Gale

EASY LISTENING



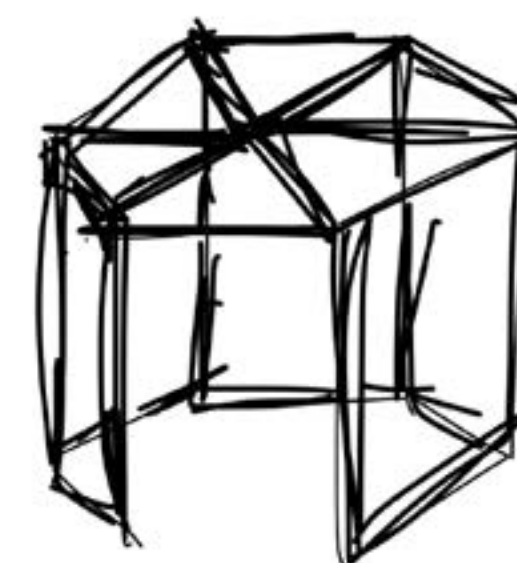
Easy listening is a category of popular music comprising songs across genres that have had their once sharp and novel edges smoothed and rounded off by the friction of wide circulation and popularity. The classification of easy listening suggests that this high level of circulation and presence produces conditions that make songs acceptable and more readily absorbed by a wide listening audience. These are songs that have performed well commercially as a result of some combination of record industry promotion via social and financial capital and resonance that the content has with the audiences who invest in the music and are touched by it. These songs go on to operate as ambient backing tracks to our most mundane activities, droning in grocery stores, malls, and hardware stores across the globe.

But there are also other materials that operate at this ambient register—the materials that constitute infrastructures that shape the spaces and roles we inhabit in institutions. Consider the arrangement of chairs in a lecture hall or the stage placement for a world tour concert. Consider the circular design of a bandstand that invites an audience to surround the performance or the circularity of the chair arrangement of a support group meeting. These arrangements reflect decisions that are informed by subjective experiences of facilitators,

psychologists, designers, architects, and engineers—decisions which materialize as fixed and accepted structures that determine the shape and circulation of audiences and groups. These infrastructures determine where audiences go and don't go; how and why they listen; what they listen to and what they don't listen to.

When we speak of sound, we are speaking of touch. So when we speak of listening, we are also speaking of being touched and of feeling. A basic physical characteristic of sound is that it behaves differently depending on the material body through which it is traveling. Sound registers in ways that are unique to the materials that it touches. While an audience is commonly understood as a passive body that absorbs and receives, it is also a material and a site in which sounds, signals, and pressure are circulated and altered. An audience can amplify or silence and much of its ability to do so is a function of its shape and the infrastructures that support it.

— Nikita Gale





A sea of gray across my windscreen. When I look up, it fills my rearview mirror. Walls of concrete—dividing the highway, lining the sides of the road—half torn, half standing, these slabs are reminders of the abundant construction that now fills the Austin skyline. Austin is a city in transition; a city undergoing a dramatic transformation; a city torn apart, literally, as exemplified by the mountains of rebar and chunks of concrete piled atop one another along vast stretches of I-35.



revolution was not the first instance in which barricades were used as tools for insurgency rather they were conceived of during the brief but noteworthy rebellion of the Huguenots in Guyenne, France in 1569. There, French citizens positioned a barricade across a road to make it impassable and it worked. This instance is, perhaps, one of the first guerilla actions in France, and the “barricade” of 1569 became the go-to form and tactic for French revolutionaries for the next 300 years.

Steel barricades line city streets, not highways, and demarcate space. The most common type are crowd control barricades, placed edge to edge in order to keep people on or off the street. They control movement. In Nikita Gale’s work, the barricade is a recurring form, signifying power and authority while also pointing to the myriad ways public spaces are regulated. Repurposed for the gallery, and as components within a multi-part installation, the barricades gain new currency. They frame and control the viewer’s experience. The barricades “tell” us where to stand, where to look, how to access the other parts of the installation, how to behave, how to be an audience. Like the barricades used in the French revolution in 1848, Gale’s are comprised of borrowed materials, pieced together for a specific action, albeit one with a different purpose. Like the concrete barricades on I-35, these are ephemeral, infrastructural, unwieldy, and a tool used to control.

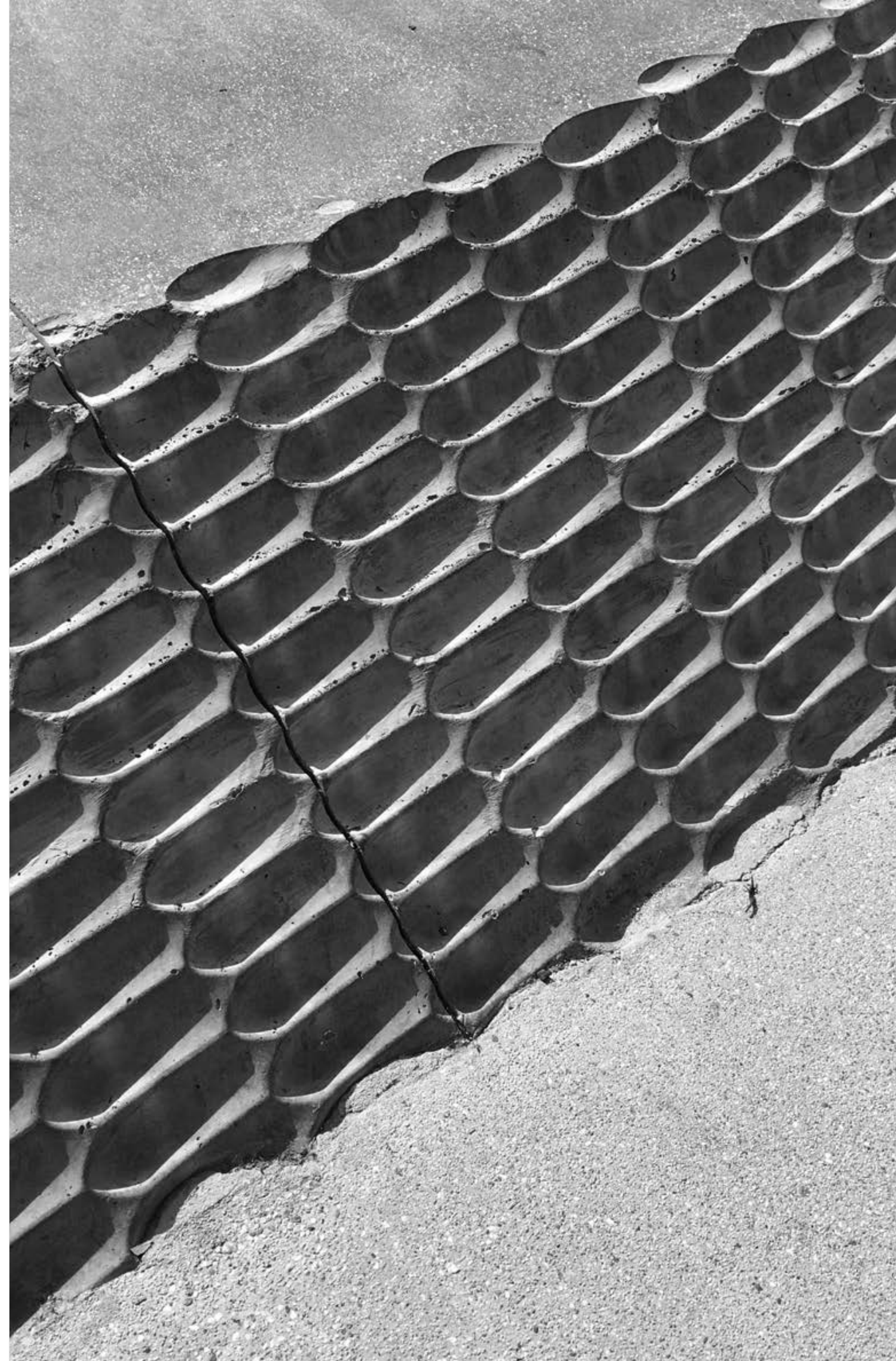
— MacKenzie Stevens

Chaotic, precarious, almost toppling over, they are the “ambient” layers, to use Nikita Gale’s term, that form the backdrop or background of my daily commute and my life here. The most noticeable feature of this ambient noise—aside from the rebar rods that form tangled masses of static—is the color. So much grey, so much beige.

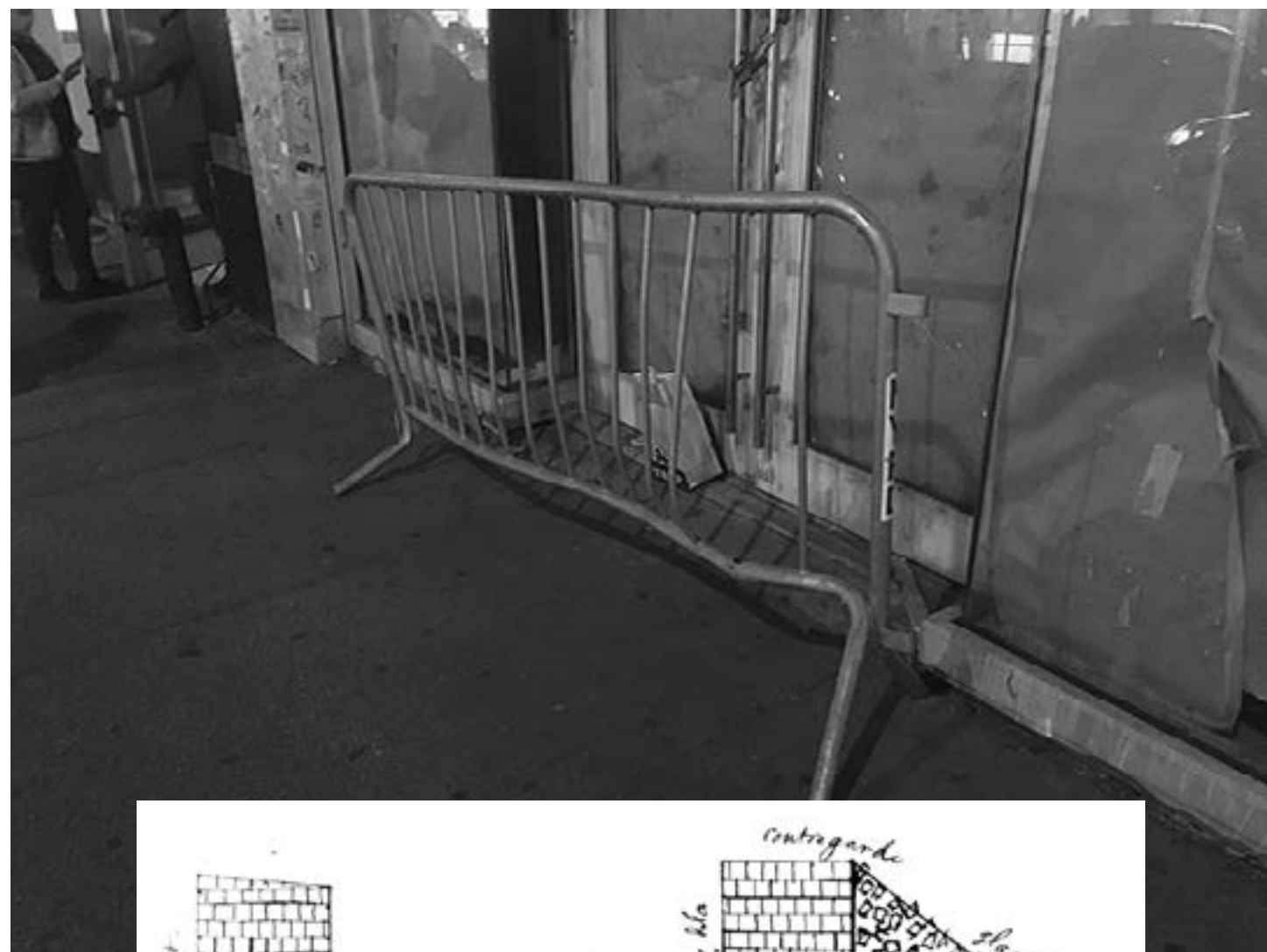
The concrete barricade defines spaces and thoroughfares, and at the worst times absorbs car collisions, but it is also a powerful tool for control, a symbol of authority, of regulated infrastructure. The very word, barricade, conjures visions of highways or other heavily regulated spaces, but also of revolution, and perhaps specifically, of the makeshift barricades designed and constructed by citizen insurgents during the 1848 revolution in France. From 2019 in Austin to 1848 in Paris. Through the words of Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables* (1862), and later made ubiquitous by the musical, the barricades became infamous, synonymous with guerrilla warfare, with agency, with improvisational utility, with power in numbers. As Eric Hazan in *A History of the Barricade* (2013) notes, the 1848







The following is an excerpt from a conversation between Nikita Gale and Marina Peterson that took place in Los Angeles on June 4, 2019. The conversation addresses themes in Gale's practice as well as ideas, forms, and materials present in the work realized during Gale's residency at the Visual Arts Center at The University of Texas at Austin.



GALE — There's an urgency or a haphazard way that I'm connecting things. Because I've been thinking a lot about barricade construction, or barricades specifically as these objects that show up a lot in images and are part of the aesthetic of protests—mostly within the last 50 years. You see barricades everywhere, and they usually indicate that something's been sanctioned or allowed to take place, which immediately makes the gesture feel less potent. I was doing this research about the history of barricades and the etymology of the word "barricade." I ended up starting with the 1848 French Revolution. People pulled up parts of the street and blocked the street with whatever materials they could find. I was really interested in that attitude of making, of trying to use what you have. It feels like a very improvisational and urgent act.

In my studio, as I was dealing with these materials, I was thinking a lot

about how to bring that attitude of making into what I was doing—thinking about protest and the relationship to public space. The concrete comes in with this idea of public space now and the prevalence of certain materials that are concrete within these spaces.

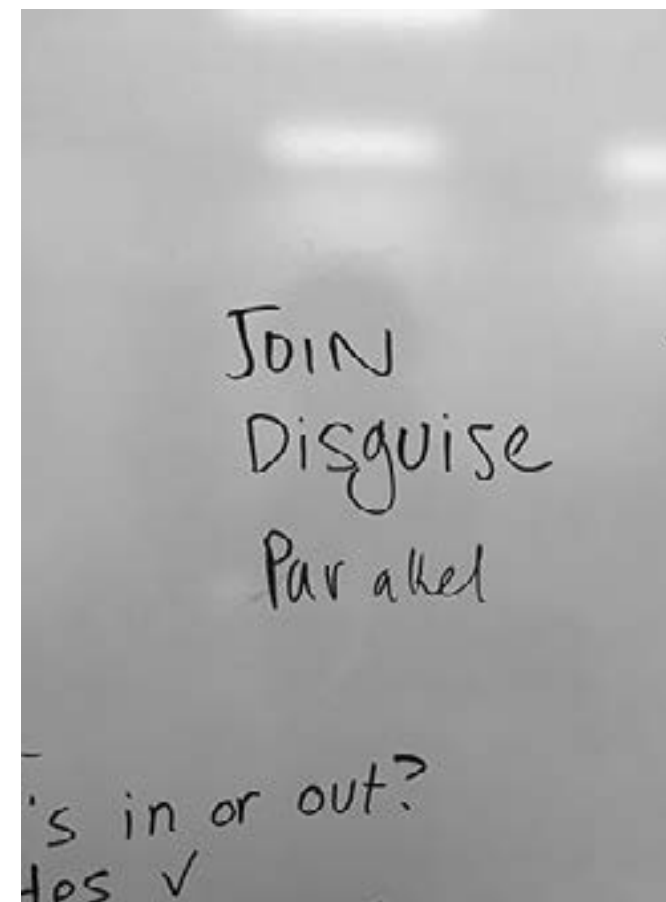
Then there's the music stands. I was thinking about the relationship between dissent or protest and how protest and dissent are channeled through recorded sound, specifically music. Music has operated as a sort of channel through which certain ideas or ideologies can be expressed or broadcast in a more palatable format. But these materials—music stands, audio cables—are just kind of ambiently present in spaces where songs or music are produced.

PETERSON — So, it sounds like you're interested in that limit point of when something organized is allowed and when it tips over.

Right, yeah.

I always think about how the street is a public thoroughfare, but also how that space is zoned in certain ways. It's a public thoroughfare for cars and not for pedestrians, so then protests are a disruption of that even though you get a permit for a protest because the protest is actually sanctioned. But you're more interested in those moments where it pushes past the democratic form.

Right. Absolutely. Also, I was doing these really long—16 feet—floor-to-ceiling-length rubbings of curbs because I was thinking about limits in those public spaces and specifically the curb as this limit or boundary between a sidewalk and the street, or where pedestrians or bodies are meant to be... I was thinking about the role that touch has in all of this and started thinking about rubbing as this sort of intimate gesture, but also as a way of marking or creating an index



or record... or making something liminal like a curb more of an object. So, I was thinking about this idea of the curb and trying to give it some sort of material weight in that particular work. That also now feels like a big sketch for works that I've made more recently.

Was that part of what the microphone cables were doing in this piece?

Yeah. I was really interested in the associations of certain materials, like the associations we have with seeing cables connected to certain objects, and how that association—*these things are connecting in some way*—informs our thinking. Or having a sense that there are signals or messages being passed that maybe we aren't picking up on, but we know are operating there.

Are you reading Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852)? Because I'm having a vague memory that it is full of these kinds of descriptions of barricades. There are these very visceral passages...

There is a text that was circulated shortly after the multiple revolutions that happened between 1848 and the late 1860s in France that was almost a zine or a pamphlet by Louis Auguste Blanqui, *Manual for an Armed Insurrection* (1866), and this text was directly addressing the citizen insurgents, encouraging them to think about the street as this space for improvisation. So, to think about boulevards not just as thoroughfares for pedestrians, but as these spaces that can be blocked off and protected and maintained. To think of the balcony as a place from which to observe public space, but also as a place from which you can launch things. There are these really poetic, interesting moments in this text as well.

That's what the Situationists take up...

Yeah. I've also been reading more sound theory like Michel Chion's *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise* (1998/2016). There are a number of things in that book that really sort of prompted the current work. I started thinking more about materials and public space because he talks about how ambient noise levels shift depending on where you are geographically, and how this relates to class.

There's that new book, *Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control* (2019) by Mack Hagood. The main thrust of it is about noise canceling technologies and what those are as social artifacts. So, white noise or the noise canceling speaker.

You should say more about what the towel is doing for you ...

The material almost becomes shorthand for a lot of these ideas. It really sort of touches on this idea that I think goes back to this attitude of improvisation and resourcefulness that I was talking about—in this case, things that can be used for noise canceling or sound dampening. In earlier work, the towels weren't dipped in concrete—they were draped as if they'd been used or were about to be used.

But are they used by protestors in a protest? Or against noise?

Towels are used a lot in DIY music studios to dampen noise. I was thinking more about it from a sound production standpoint. So, when I was doing YouTube research about noise cancelation and towels, I noticed that there were a lot of people—like musicians or others—using them. But I've also seen applications of it where people are trying to just block out sound from coming into their homes. Others were like, "this is an interior decorating thing as well." There's a lot in there about the boundary or relationship between the interior and exterior.

This project I'm doing with Triple Canopy (*Omniaudience*) has also been influencing how I think about the audience.

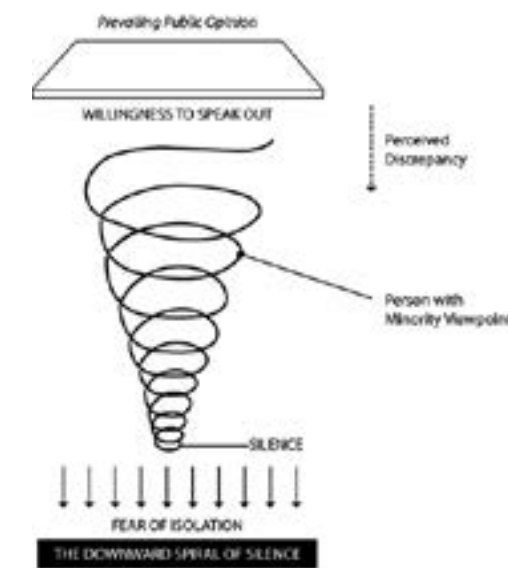
And, I'm interested in group relations theory, which is something I started studying when I was at UCLA working with Andrea Fraser. I recently revisited this discipline and have been thinking about silence and how it is a political position. It's very nuanced in that it can simultaneously be collusion with some other sound or intention or a resistance.

So, materials and towels as tools for dampening. It's interesting in terms of thinking about silence—what are you silencing, right?

I think that's kind of the question—what am I silencing or what am I trying to block out? It's a question that I'm constantly grappling with.

Right. So, what I'm hearing—being silent as an act, and silencing other sounds that you're listening to, right?

Yeah. It was around the time of the presidential election when I felt like I was seeing all of this documentation of these very grand gestures of dissent or protest and feeling very... not necessarily suspicious, but just questioning what the meaning of noise or public speech or political speech at that point really was. I was feeling the desire to silence certain things or find a quiet place for contemplation. But, I simultaneously felt alienated and silenced by the discourse because it



just felt like there was a lot of arguing and not a lot of listening—just speaking and not much else.

So, that was driving my thinking about materials, and specifically what materials touched on or conveyed my feeling of wanting to silence...

To block out this noise of the elections and also to find some kind of space for a different mode of engagement with it. Is this what you are doing for the UT project?

There are these iPhone videos I've been working on that are shots of crowds and that include all of the technical hoopla that goes into high production concerts, like lights and infrastructure, but also just the crowds.

So, those are the silent listening spaces you were thinking about?

Just thinking about the materials and the settings where these things take place is really interesting to me.

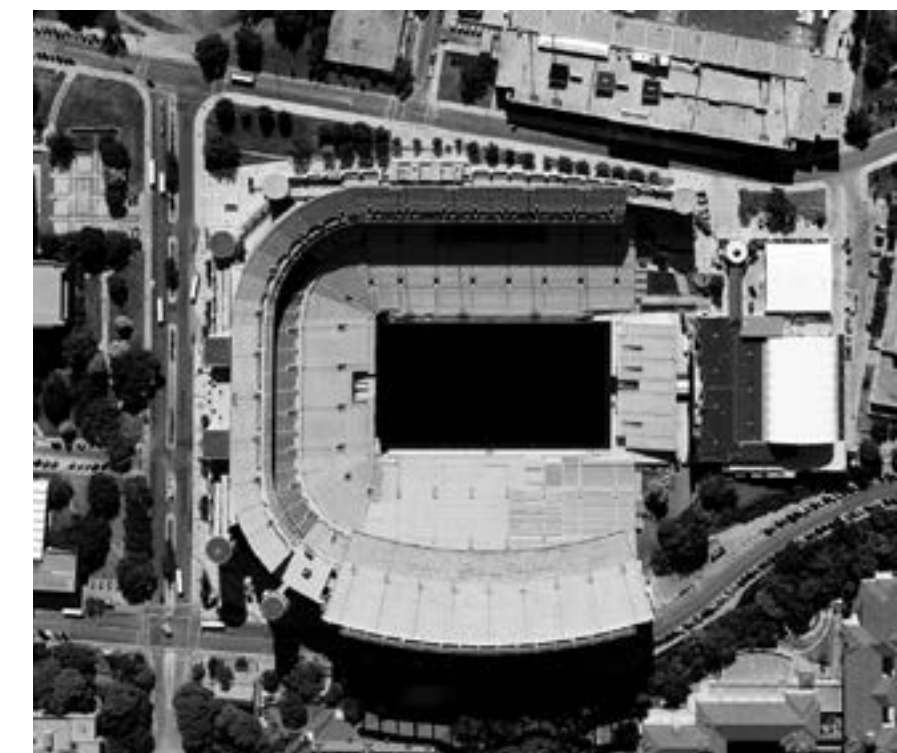
Concrete is such a complicated material. At the moment, it keeps

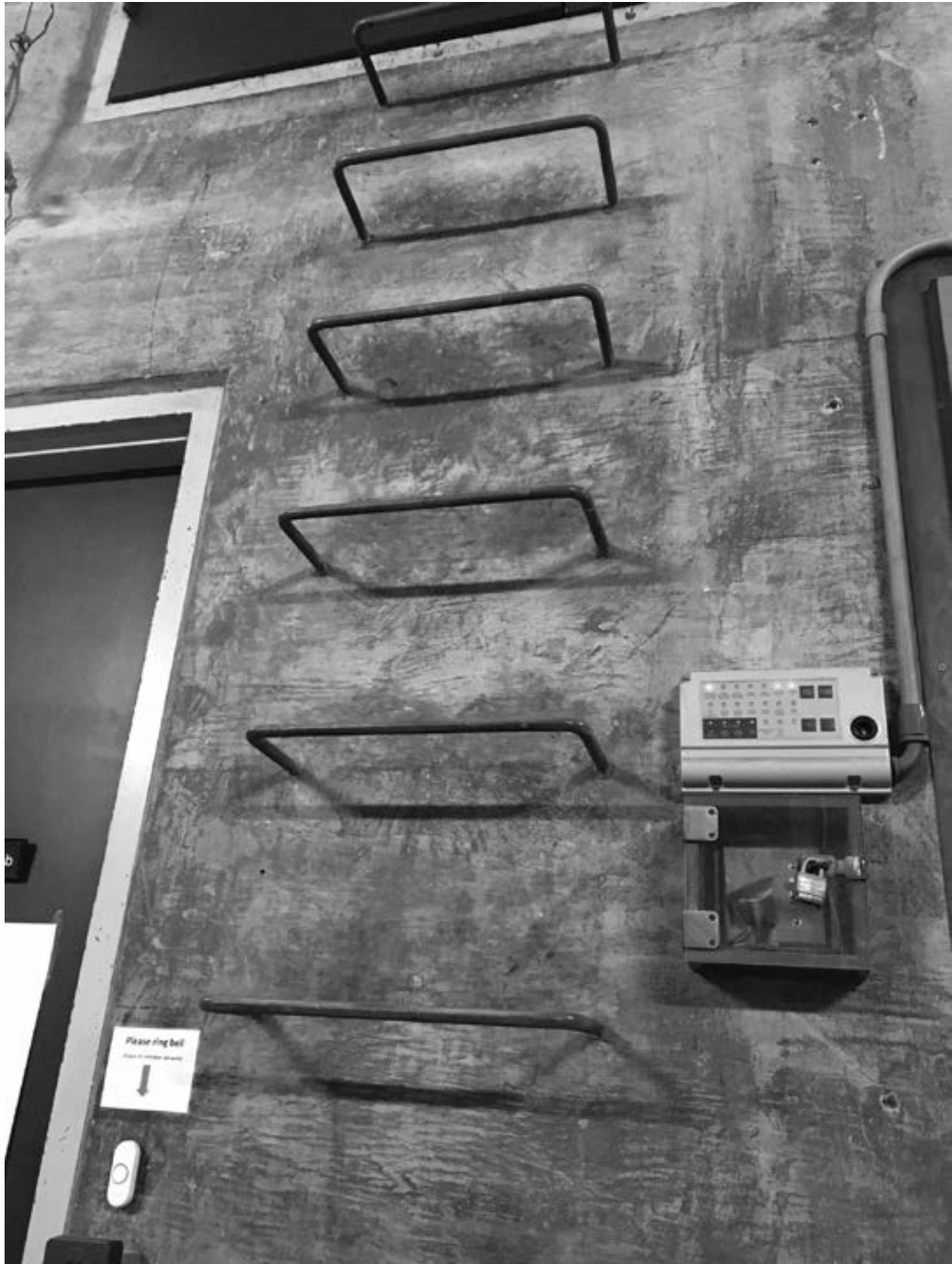
coming up as this environmental problem. On the radio yesterday, they were talking about how much concrete is in LA. Or concrete as marking the Anthropocene.

That's interesting. I can't remember where I read this, but it talked about the way concrete reflects heat, so it actually raises the temperature of certain spaces.

Yeah, in the kids' area of the Natural History Museum they have all those figures about LA, and one of them that stands out is that it's seventy percent paved.

Yeah. It's really nuts.





But what does it do for you to put it on the towels?

It goes from this material that absorbs to a material that reflects, in a way. It's hardened and also fixed. It's still recognizable as a towel, but the concrete has really locked it in place.

So, are you thinking about freeway sound walls? I think they've thought about using other materials but, somehow, it always comes back to using concrete.

I think that has to do with how certain ideas or ideologies are just infused into the way things are built and constructed. I've been thinking more about that in terms of infrastructural projects, and the relationship between social biases and attitudes and the way that they influence civil engineering projects... like dams and roads, which are really boring but important things that blend into the background. So, that's also something that I've been thinking about in terms of this relationship to concrete... I've been using the word ambient—sort of an ambient feature of public space.

Are you also a musician?

I was a bedroom musician for a very long time before I had a studio practice, but I still go back to it occasionally. I play guitar and I do a lot of sound design for videos, but I haven't made a song in a long time. But you're a musician too, right?

Yeah.

I made these works in January that were essentially... do you know what fixed ladders are? They're these industrial ladders that are usually just steel rungs that are built into the side of a building or into concrete structures. I have been really curious about these things as architectural features that allow the building or space to be maintained for a long period of time. So, they're just a permanent addition to a space that allows access for maintenance.

I like that. That's great.

Thanks. I have been thinking about architecture and these features that indicate permanent maintenance. Something that always needs to be replaced or fixed.

And that kind of hidden labor too...

Exactly. I work in media and lighting and there's maintenance associated with these things, so I use these ladders or scissor lifts or other industrial tools and think about how these less noticeable features register for me in a way that they wouldn't for someone else.

Right. The infrastructures of repair. But the crowd... I'm wondering, what are the infrastructures of the crowd?

Yeah. It's funny, because there's this quote from an interview with Bayard Rustin, who was a really active figure in the civil rights movement but was one of the people working behind the scenes. When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

was preparing for the “I Have A Dream” speech, Rustin was really obsessing over the sound system. So, there’s this interview where he talks about how you turn a crowd into an audience, and he was really, really concerned about the quality of the sound system because the initial sound system was this really shitty setup. Then one of the Kennedys got involved and had the Army Corps of Engineers produce the sound system so everyone could hear the speech.

So, the speaker is really important. The microphone, speaker, and the sound production. Do you have material on that—on what the speaker system was?

I’m sure if I did some research I could figure it out.

That’s interesting.

I sat in the commencement, which was really boring, but the funny thing was that it became less boring when the speakers weren’t working.

Ha.

Or when the microphone started dropping out...

Was it wireless?

Yeah. Right, they’re fallible. Sometimes they say don’t use your cell [during these events]. It’s interesting because we used to hear the interception of the cellphone, or the interference, but now that’s all shielded—so, again, a silencing.

But then how there’s still this interaction and this work being done by these radio signal devices.

...

You were talking about sound as pressure or touch.

Yeah.



I’ve been thinking about that a little bit too... R. Murray Schafer—who is just so normative and so grouchy—but he also really loves sound and cares. But he has these moments. He has this line that sound is touch from a distance.

Oh, wow. That’s... so great.

So, these nice ways of destabilizing that divide between hearing and sound and thinking of sound more as a physicality of pressure, as being something that’s actually relational—the materiality of sound itself as a kind of relational presence.

It also brings in the notion of the body as material...

Material and also relational. Resonating, and not in a kind of divided way, human and otherwise ...

There are files at UCLA of an acoustical physicist named Vern Knudsen. He was working across a large span of time. They had these experiments in the ’20s because they were doing work on hearing for deafness: “How do we help deaf people hear differently?” They were doing experiments about what you could sense through your finger, how you could sense sound differently through your finger, and could you actually learn to hear through your finger. It was very interesting. They determined that you could hear different frequencies but maybe not amplitude or vice versa.

Oh, wow.

Yeah. Thinking differently about sound than how it has settled in now.

Okay. That’s cool. There’s often a misconception of sound as a kind of object that is externalized and then received when it’s just a pressure that’s resonating.

Perception of sound is not just in the ear. Of course, it’s not just in the ear, but how do we get out of that?

—

Nikita Gale: EASY LISTENING is on
view at the Visual Arts Center at
The University of Texas at Austin
September 20 – December 6, 2019.

EASY LISTENING is organized by
MacKenzie Stevens, Director,
Visual Arts Center.

The exhibition is generously supported
by the Kaleta A. Doolin Foundation.

