

# BUILDING BLOCKS

MEGAN LYKINS REICH

“Rapid prototyping” is a popular phrase these days. In formal terms, it refers to fabrication methods that use data from computer-aided design (CAD) programs to print small-scale, three-dimensional objects. Informally, the expression has an expanded use in fields like organizational behavior and strategic planning. For artist Julia Christensen, it both defines the production of her work, *THE FUTURE IS IN THE LOBBY* (2013), and refers to the kind of social engagement, and short bursts of activity, that the work encourages.

*THE FUTURE IS IN THE LOBBY* consists of 54 white plastic pieces, of different shapes and sizes, that attach together in assorted ways. Combined one particular way, the blocks spell out the work’s title. Christensen meticulously designed each block digitally by breaking up the letters into a set of assorted sculptural forms. These renderings were fabricated using a 3D printer, which applies infinitesimal drops of plastic in layers that harden into rigid objects.

The 3D printing process (another term for rapid prototyping) is remarkable, and its potential for making things in the future is mind-bending. Some forecasts suggest biological outcomes—new organs made from, among other things, print cartridges filled with cells. In the meantime, the process allows for the creation of any geometric form one can imagine, at ever-increasing scales and with progressively more diverse materials. It opens the field, not only for scientists, but for artists like Christensen.

It is common for contemporary artists to use external fabricators to produce works they design. Although her process is the most technologically advanced in *Realization is Better than Anticipation*, Christensen is not the only artist in the exhibition whose work is constructed, in part, by an outside “hand.” At the other end of the spectrum, Lauren Yeager relies on the sun’s light to create her monthly calendars. These two works are perfect bookends for *Realization’s* exploration of production, with Yeager using the most natural available resource—the sun—and Christensen employing one of the most advanced manufacturing tools available today.

Christensen’s use of technology points to a growing investment in, and reliance upon, digital technologies as mechanisms for realization. Yet, the work retains a personal touch. The glistening surfaces of Christensen’s objects are striking. Though machine-made of plastic, each block has distinctive textures reminiscent of textiles or carved wood. Some surfaces are woven while others have tiny linear patterns. These delicate, granular surfaces signify the layered printing process; however, they also denote the artist. Tiny inconsistencies in the objects’ forms reveal minor discrepancies in Christensen’s digital designs. Like a brushstroke or fingerprint, they become indices of the artist’s hand—a new kind of gesture.

One of the benefits of rapid prototyping is the ability to model new ideas quickly and effectively. *THE FUTURE IS IN THE LOBBY* provides an opportunity to test the relationship of space and cultural value as they relate to a particularly tentative environment: the art museum lobby. Once an ancillary zone reserved for basic transactions, art museum lobbies have become adaptable spaces, designed to support a diverse array of activities. As analyzed by John Yau in his essay “Please Wait by the Coatroom,” museum lobbies are transition spaces for audiences and also, at times, for artworks that the institution can neither fully

include nor exclude. Unquestionably, artworks placed in lobbies, hallways, or other multi-use spaces have a different relationship with the environment and audience than if they were installed in a designated gallery. Inspired by Yau's text, Christensen's work directly addresses the hierarchy of museum spaces and how they influence the value and meaning of art (and experiences) within them.

MOCA Cleveland's "lobby" is a free, open area that includes a welcome desk, museum store, café kiosk, restrooms, locker area, and Gund Commons, a 25-foot high, 1,500 square foot event space. This communal ground floor does not have a dedicated gallery, but it regularly features art, including installations and projected video works. Intended for use by diverse audiences doing different things, the space is highly flexible; an elasticity that both supports and confounds certain kinds of use.

Installed in Gund Commons, *THE FUTURE IS IN THE LOBBY* probes the relationship between value and location within the art museum. When not in use, the objects are enclosed within padlocked, gilded cases. Visible, but physically inaccessible, seductive yet resistant, the objects in the cases—and the cases themselves—function explicitly as art objects, imbued with implicit value and exclusivity. During the exhibition, artists and cultural groups will be invited to the Museum to incorporate the building blocks into their typical artistic activity in some way. For instance, an experimental musician may use the pieces as instruments, while a deportment class may use the blocks to teach proper table etiquette.

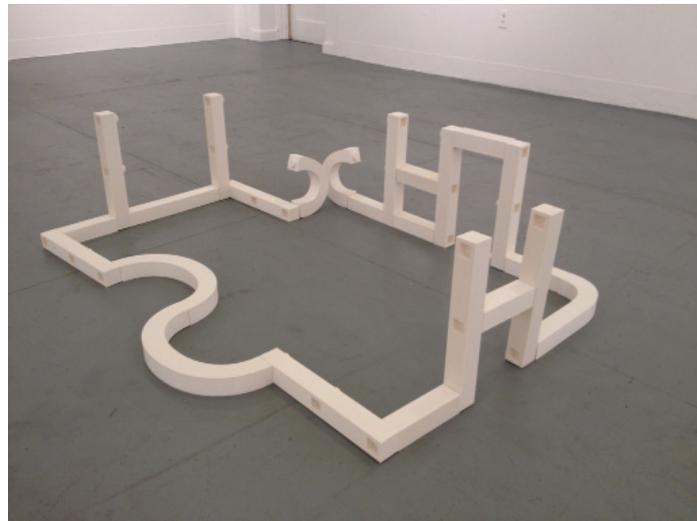
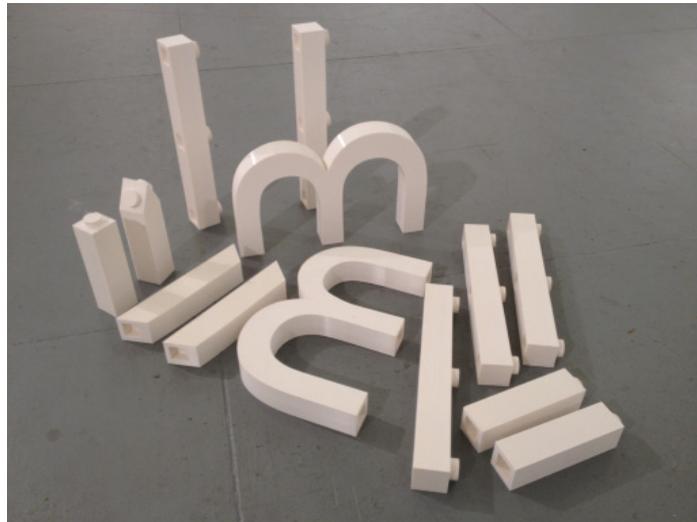
Deliberately diverse, and on the periphery of conventional art museum activity, these "rapid prototype" interventions will serve as catalysts for creative conversation and critique about public space and its relationship to art and audiences. Some activities will blend these elements; others will emphasize their symbolic tensions. Quick, experimental, and provisional, these activities are not meant to confirm assumptions, but rather to audition ideas and possibilities.

The looming question for Christensen is how such associations generate new value propositions between action, artwork, and the museum. Although emphasizing the contradictions inherent within the art museum lobby, *THE FUTURE IS IN THE LOBBY* also initiates a dialogue about the space's creative potential. Offering real building blocks, generated by a kind of speculative production, Christensen provides opportunities to assemble new meaning within this complex environment.

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<sup>1</sup> John Yau. "Please Wait by the Coatroom: Wilfredo Lam in the Museum of Modern Art," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russel Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 133-141.

JULIA CHRISTENSEN  
**LABOR I FINISH**





Julia Christensen, *THE FUTURE IS IN THE LOBBY*, 2013, rapid prototype components, gilded wood, brass, Plexiglas, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.