Jimmy Kuehnle takes up space. His past works include massively-scaled inflatable costumes and outlandish bicycles that put the artist in close, unusual contact with the world around him. Most recently, Kuehnle has started making site-specific sculptures, representing a shift from personal performance to the activation of space. These works “get in the way,” disrupting usual functions and raising questions about public versus private, and the “place” of art.

For How to Remain Human MOCA commissioned Kuehnle to create an installation for MOCA Cleveland’s three-story Kohl atrium. Alluring, odd, and delightful, his new work Please, no smash. engages the Museum’s audience, architecture, and neighborhood in an interactive way. It begs visitors to push, press, nuzzle, and otherwise respond to its curious presence and shifting form. Made from hundreds of yards of neon pink PVC fabric, the work hovers above viewers as it slowly inflates and deflates. Its lights flicker and glow according the time of day, and the form radiates a hot pink glow that is visible from outside the Museum at night. When it’s fully expanded, the work’s plump body extends into most areas of the Kohl Atrium. On the ground level, leg-like protrusions zig-zag down from above like bulbous stalactites, creating tunnels and pathways. At various stair landings, the sculpture balloons over the handrail and swells up to the ceiling. As it deflates, the work recoils and draws up against the wall. It functions like a living, breathing organism, or an erratically beating heart inside the Museum.

Please, no smash. bears structural and aesthetic similarities to Kuehnle’s previous inflatable costumes and sculptures. It is the most complex sculpture the artist has built to date, with its unique combination of scale, movement, mechanics, and mounting system presenting many unknowns. Kuehnle thrives on the unfamiliar. He regularly generates ideas that push him beyond his current limits and force him to learn, grow, and expand. Of course, failure is inevitable. So Kuehnle conceives his projects to minimize the severity of failure—barring ultimate catastrophe, what are the ways this may shift/fail that are acceptable aesthetically, mechanically, institutionally. In these ways, Please, no smash. represents how contemporary art practice relates to and invokes other industries. Artists are problem solvers. Their works are solutions, though not necessarily answers.

Here are some answers from the artist about aspects of this work.
How did you approach designing the sculpture’s form? Are there any references that inspired its shapes and protrusions? How did the architecture influence your design choices?

I wanted to fill the space with form and mass. I think that inflatables are very interesting when you are inside one. When you’re inside an inflatable, the lack of 90-degree angles and natural architectural forms really makes for a surreal experience, and I enjoy it very much. Some of my original ideas were based on an inflatable that would completely fill the space and only leave spots for people to stand with the work enveloping them. Lights would shine down from above indicating the spots that would be safe in the sculpture, as it would come down and surround that entire area. Some of the first designs included these all-encompassing sections. Some were only (in theory) three feet high, so they would require squatting and not have enough room for a standing adult. There were also passageways that required visitors to meander through the inflatable. The logistics of this idea were not feasible, however, so in this case, the zigzag protrusions are my attempt at making a surreal, absurd, abstract atmosphere in the environment.

The architecture influenced my design by its very shape. MOCA Cleveland’s building has a very hard feeling, so I wanted something soft and overwhelming to shove up against these rigid architectural elements. I started with a 3D model of the Kohl Atrium that I built from CAD plans of the original building. I designed shapes that would fill that space in different ways. Some design decisions such as the height of the steel armature that supports the piece, as well as the sharp angle of the railings, had to be sculpted around. I also wanted to press against the sloping glass on the Museum’s exterior.

Why pink?

I like pink. The Museum’s interior color palette is blue, black, and white—very cold on the interior aside from the yellow interior stairs. Of course, this is by design. In a museum, the artworks are meant to be highlighted. I wanted to have something that really juxtaposed that blue steel, something warm and illuminating and glowing. That limited the piece to colors such as red, orange, yellow, or pink; no blues, no greens, no purples. Also, nylon fabric only comes in a limited color palette. You can have any color custom made, but why reinvent the wheel when they sell hot pink fabric?

Describe if and how your impression of MOCA Cleveland’s architecture changed while making and installing, Please, no smash.

My experience of the architecture changed as I made the digital model for the initial ideation and sketches. As I was making the 3D model, I kept second-guessing myself, thinking, “That can’t be where that is,” or “It can’t really be that angle.” Everything seemed so strange as I recreated it in digital form and filled it with ideas and sculptures. Then I double-checked those ideas in reality by measuring the physical space. My model was within an inch or so of the building, which makes sense because there are adjustments that occur during construction. I learned to appreciate and experience the architecture of MOCA Cleveland much more. I also learned how difficult it is to work on a lift, especially since there was always something just out of reach. Often I thought, “It’s just over there, but I can’t get there, because there is a reverse cantilever sloping piece of glass.”
Upon first read, the title Please, no smash. seems to be a request from either you or the sculpture itself (to the viewer, assumedly). However, installed in the Museum, I suddenly read it as an appeal by the building to the sculpture, a plea for the work to keep its distance (which it obviously ignores). Talk about the title--how did you come to it, and has its meaning changed for you over time?

I like titles that make people like you curious, but also offer the potential for the viewer’s own interpretation by having some sort of call-to-action for the audience. Yes, Please, no smash. is definitely a request to not be smashed by the art. It also is a request from the sculpture not to be smashed. It could be interpreted as an impression or request from the building. But you can’t really smash it: if you press on it, it will pop back. Because the sculpture will sometimes go down towards the audience, it may very well be the audience pleading, “Please don’t smash.” as well as the building as it comes towards the glass.

During installation, you mentioned that Please, no smash. converges many previous works—both in form and function—into one ginormous installation. What surprises did you encounter during the process of planning, constructing, and installing this work? Can you estimate its influence on your future inflatables, or work in general?

When I work on projects, I always like to learn things and have new experiences. I don’t want to just repeat things I know. So I set up challenges, situations that require me to learn new techniques, skills, and processes, to use new materials, to know something that I don’t know now, in order to make the work. Yet, I don’t want to plunge into the darkness or “jump off a cliff,” so these unknowns are usually extensions or variations on themes that I already understand.

For this work, I focused on several themes and processes that I partially understood, and extended them all into unknown territory. I combined them into a single artwork so that all those unknowns, combined into a new work, would add up to something very new for me.

Although this work is heavily planned from start to finish and executed according to plan, it still had many different surprises. For example, my interest in the space originally came from seeing Michelle Grabner’s sculpture, Grabner/Killam Family Summer 2013 (2013) hanging from the ceiling. I thought to myself, “Great, you can hang stuff there,” only to find out after initial planning that the ceiling was not an option in this case. So I decided to cantilever off the wall and use brackets on the metal railings. The form had to be redesigned to accommodate that style of armature rather than anchors coming from the ceiling. I had to learn a bit about electronics, mechanical winches, sailing blocks (pulleys) and stage rigging rope as I worked on the piece—things that I did not expect to be researching. I had to learn the open-source Arduino micro-controller programming platform as well as some other electronics to get the sculpture to work. There are many surprises and setbacks along the way, but that’s part of the fun of working on a site-specific piece.

Most times, when I finally finish an inflatable, I swear I won’t make one for a while. But they’re so much fun! Somehow this center of gravity keeps pulling me back. I think that I will incorporate more kinetic effects in future projects. This is not the first time that I’ve used illumination, and I will continue to do that because it provides different views of the sculpture at night and day. And I’ll probably continue making things with an ON and OFF button.
Jimmy Kuehnle

Please, no smash, 2015
Fabric, thread, fans, electronics
dimensions variable
Installation view, MOCA Cleveland
Photo: Timothy Safrankek Photographics
Jimmy Kuehnle’s installation, *Please, no smash.* (2015) is a vivid pink presence at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland—monumental in scale, but more malleable and tender than most monuments ever aspire to be.

I’ve encountered Jimmy and his remarkable inflatables in other contexts, including projects we’ve worked on together for specific sites in Cleveland. In partnership with Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, Jimmy has deployed his talents to protect pedestrians from downtown traffic (*Pop Up Rockwell*, Cleveland, 2012), enliven an underutilized parking garage (*Hipp Deck*, Cleveland, 2011), and shelter people on a long walk across a dark bridge (*The Detroit-Superior Bridge Project*, Cleveland, 2013).

These objects pull people near with a playful and irresistible force. Once we have their attention, it becomes possible to have all kinds of conversations about future development plans and public realm improvements. An inflatable object is an excellent icebreaker.

Jimmy’s current installation has a somewhat different intent. He’s created a friendly form at MOCA Cleveland that interacts with museum visitors and engages pedestrians outside. Even when no one is around, it continues to inflate and deflate, inhale and exhale. Perhaps it even sighs occasionally when it feels lonely, or crumples after a long day on the job.

Of course, it’s a thing, not a person. But Jimmy gives us permission to anthropomorphize his installations. He makes relatable objects, akin to other, more figurative artworks such as the encompassing embrace of Louise Bourgeois’s *Maman* (1999), a towering, 30’ tall spider figure, the deceptive puffiness of Jeff Koons’s *Balloon Dog* (2002), or the buoyant sweetness of Florentijn Hofman’s *Rubber Duck* (2009).

Unlike these other works, Jimmy’s installation at MOCA Cleveland is not a recognizable creature. But it is undeniably creaturely. Suspended more than twenty feet in the air, its body contorts and strains against the walls of the Museum. Its columns (or legs) stretch to the ground. It moves as we move (sort of) and we identify with its existential struggles.

It also functions as architecture. It creates and defines space, providing opportunities for chance encounters under and around its massive pinkness. Prior to installing the piece, Jimmy prepared architectural renderings to show how it would fit within MOCA Cleveland’s atrium. The avatars who inhabit Jimmy’s rendered world are clustered near the inflated object, not really looking at it, nor at each other. In its posture and presence, the object is notably more natural and alive than the people drawn around it.

In architectural jargon, the human occupants of a rendering are sometimes referred to as *people textures*—cut and paste characters intended to provide human scale and establish a social context. But in this case, it’s the object we’re more likely to identify with and befriend. It’s a companionable thing, an inflatable counterpart to our own humanity.

Maybe someday this charismatic character will produce offspring, as tiny pink plushies or refrigerator magnets in the MOCA Store. If one follows you home, you can keep it. And take great pleasure in its (and your own) existence.
1. Jimmy Kuehnle
rendering for Please, no smash
Courtesy of the artist

2. Jimmy Kuehnle
Please, no smash, 2015
Installation view, MOCA Cleveland
Photo: Timothy Safrankek Photographics

3. View of Please, no smash lighting up the MOCA Cleveland Atrium from outside the building at night.