



**SARAH
OPPENHEIMER
D-17**

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16 SEPTEMBER – 5 DECEMBER 2010

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Rice Gallery
HOUSTON, TEXAS



foreword I vividly recall entering P.P.O.W. Gallery in New York and immediately confronting the horizontal barrier that initiated the experience of Sarah Oppenheimer's installation, *554-5251* (2006). The gesture was audacious and its surface alluring. The structure was so well made and had such a high degree of finish that I wondered if the work had been done by an architect. The barrier forced me to set out on a path around a long, tube-like enclosure that I would later learn was in reality, a dimensionally deep hole. At the end of a maze-like journey, I found myself looking into a storage room that for some reason seemed utterly fascinating and surprising because the room had never been in my visual field when I traversed the gallery space. Recalling my path I felt I should be somewhere else. Then, only an instant later did I realize that in bodily feeling and psychological awareness, I *was* somewhere else. My movement through the installation and the destination I reached made me feel almost as if I had new skin – fragile and amazed to be conscious of a new reality. Sarah Oppenheimer's reconfiguration of architectural space produced a very real change in my consciousness, as well as a feeling of delight to be introduced to the mind of the person who had created it.

Since then I have seen many of Sarah Oppenheimer's sculptural installations and I have felt the same in the presence of each. The simplicity and power of her works shock you into the present moment of which, you suddenly realize, you were oblivious. Sarah's work initiates a perceptual change of time and space that feels almost like becoming aware of a 4th dimension. If I were to see Sarah's works without having met her, I might toss a guess of scientist or psychologist into the mix of assumptions, but now, having worked closely with Sarah I know her to be an artist of the highest level.

When I invited Sarah to create an installation for Rice Gallery I knew that it would be one of the more complex projects we had undertaken, and it was by far the most ambitious, requiring the assistance of professionals on and off the Rice campus including architects, structural engineers, and numerous types of fabricators.

554-5251, 2006; installation detail, view from main gallery; P-P-O-W, New York

554-5251, 2006; installation detail, view from entrance; P-P-O-W, New York





Horizontal Roll, 2008; installation detail, framed views of Piet Mondrian, *No. 4*, 1938-42, and Ellsworth Kelly's *Spectrum II*, 1966-67, St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri

When Sarah arrived in February 2009 for her first site visit, she stepped into the gallery, and began pouring out her ideas. She spoke about the space like no other artist I have worked with, almost as if it were like putty in her mind; she inquired about

blueprints, structural components and the materials of which Sewall Hall was made as she assessed the space's malleability. One idea would reveal the crawlspace above the gallery by lowering the entire ceiling. Another idea required cutting a 4 x 8-foot hole in the rear wall of the gallery to expose a view of the sky, cutting a similar hole in a side wall to reveal activity in a gallery office, and the removal of a 16 x 5-foot panel from the front glass wall. Yet these were not wild notions, but seriously considered proposals. To my surprise, the Rice architect and contractor I had invited to be present seemed in awe of Sarah's visionary thinking and were eager to help her make one of the ideas a reality. In the end, the projected costs of the projects made them impossible, but as I told Sarah, if we had the money she could have done whatever she wanted.

610-3356, 2008; installation detail, view from fourth floor; Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

D-17's elegant form ascended from the right rear corner of the gallery, appeared to pass through the glass wall, and exited the building above the entryway. An open channel in the top of the form allowed a stream of natural light to flow in, and from the rear of the gallery one could look up the illuminated channel and see a framed view of treetops and sky. Standing in the gallery foyer and looking into the gallery through a viewing hole cut into the underside of the form, one could see the same view. The "D" in the installation's name stands for this visual doubling.

I thank Sarah for one of the most extraordinary installations created at Rice Gallery, or for that matter, anywhere. We marveled at how Sarah proceeded with tireless good humor throughout the entire odyssey of conceiving,



planning, and constructing *D-17*. Engineers, architects, and fabricators marveled at how she was able to do it, and even though we were aware of every detail, the flawless illusion of the massive form soaring through the glass wall still seemed miraculous. Sarah revealed something remarkable to us, something we had not known about time and space in relation to artistic forms. She swept away what had gone before to reveal an art form that was fresh, complete, and unforeseen.

Kimberly Davenport
Director

acknowledgements

I invited Sarah to create an installation for Rice Gallery knowing that it would be an extremely complex project and require the help of many individuals. *D-17* would not have been possible without the assistance of our Rice University colleagues who went above and beyond what anyone would expect. Thanks to Kathryn Cavender, Director, Rice Environmental Health and Safety, and the following Facilities Engineering and Planning staff members: Max Amery, Senior Facilities Engineer; Barbara White Bryson, Associate Vice President; Richard Stearman, Construction Services Manager; Joan Stutheit, Project Manager, and Joujou Zebdaoui, Project Manager.

Architecture Center Houston Foundation (ArCH) provided major support for this exhibition catalogue. ArCH has allowed us to document this temporary work of art and to further explore the relationship between architecture and installation art.

I am grateful to Robin Clark, Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, and Barbara Luderowski, Founding Director, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, for sharing their knowledge of Sarah's work. Thanks to Donna Kacmar, Associate Professor, University of

Houston Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, and designer Alex Lahti, who guided us to Houston's top fabricators.

In June 2010, we had the great pleasure of seeing first-hand what an amazing teacher Sarah is when she came to Rice Gallery to lead a workshop she named *Wormholes Through the Curtain Wall*. Over three days, she guided 8 students selected by Dean of Architecture Sarah Whiting in an intensive study to analyze the light conditions and reflectivity affecting the glass curtain wall. Using a full-scale mock-up in the gallery, light meters, digital cameras, and Rhinoceros 3D design software, the class experimented with the ways light affects the Rice Gallery space. So enthusiastic were students by the end of the workshop that they voluntarily returned to school a week early to help with the construction of *D-17*. I thank Sarah Whiting for her vision and enthusiastic collaboration. Rice Gallery Patrons Dr. Anne Chao and Phoebe Tudor led a fundraising effort that made possible this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for students. We are grateful to each of these individuals: Jory Alexander, Nancy C. Allen, Brad and Leslie Bucher, Anne and Albert Chao, Melinda Clark and Clark Trantham, Dillon Kyle Architecture, Karen and Larry George, Humphrey

Company, Ltd., Marek Family of Companies, Nightingale Code Foundation, Ralph S. O'Connor, Phoebe and Bobby Tudor, and Fabené Welch. The DVD at the back of this catalogue includes a section on the workshop with an introduction by Sarah Oppenheimer, workshop photographs, and the names of student participants.

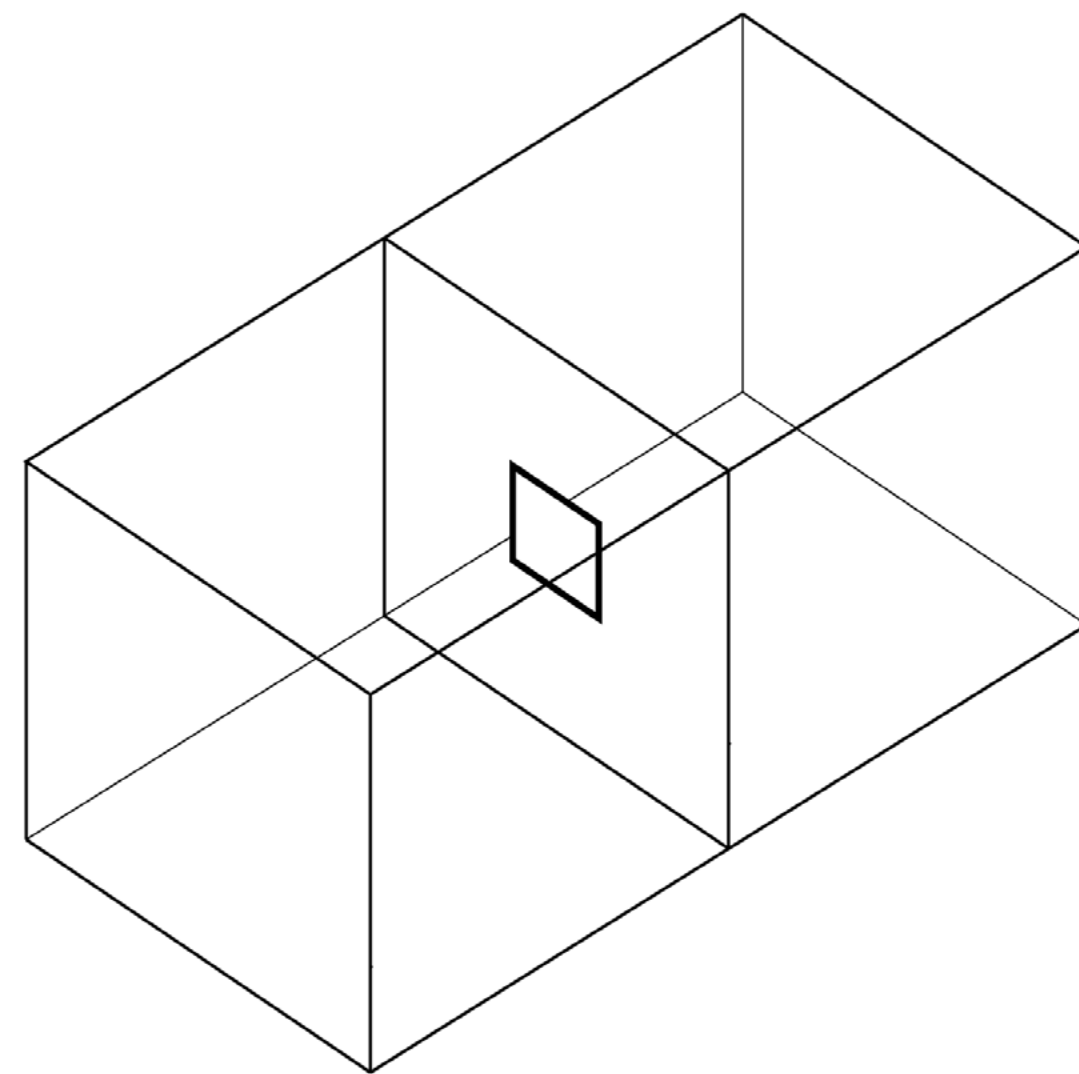
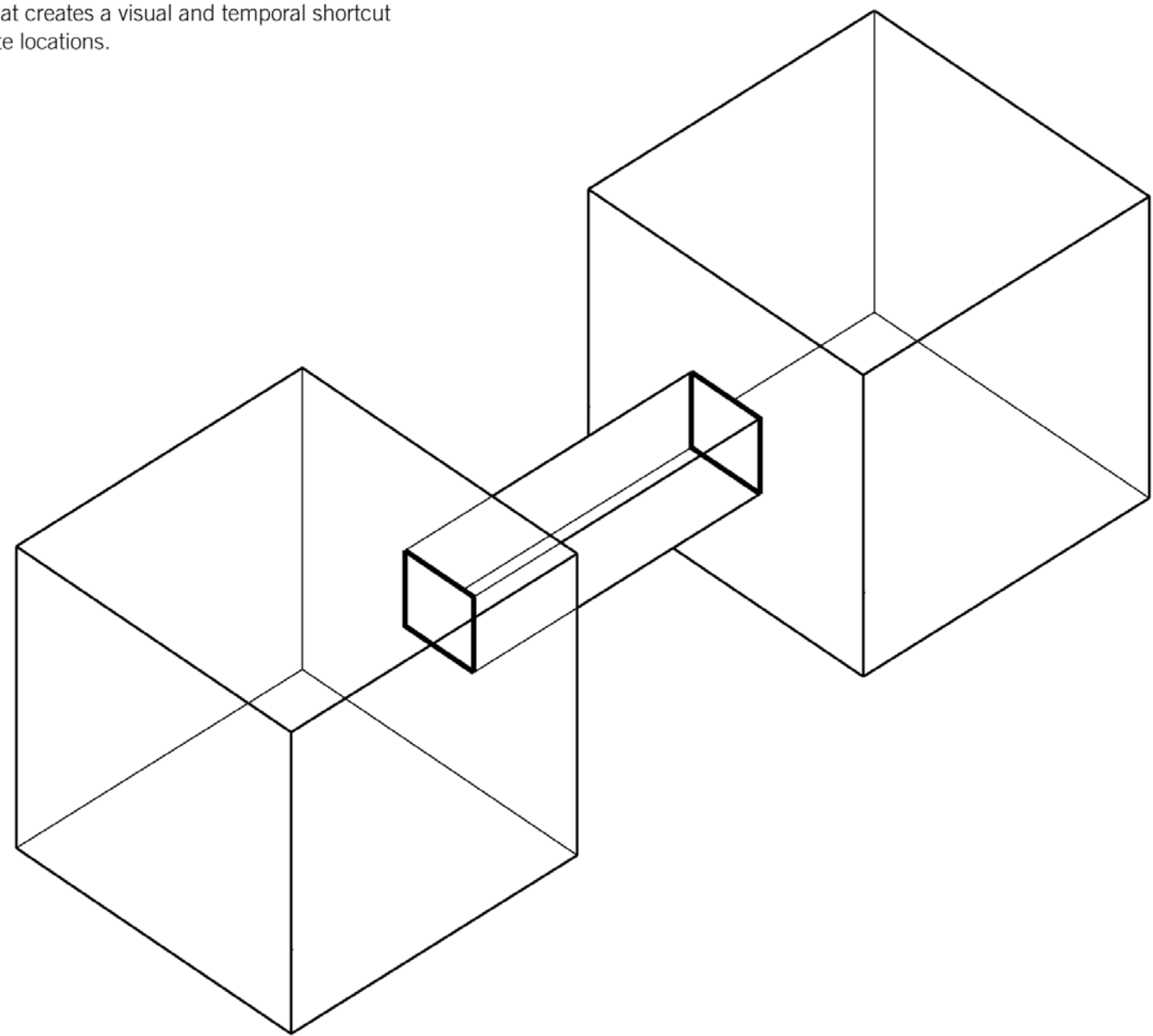
When Sarah arrived in August 2010 to begin work the gallery became a construction site dominated by a huge wooden armature that resembled a dinosaur skeleton. On the floor lay a jigsaw puzzle of steel plates that would interlock and form the work's "skin." Guided by Sarah's outstanding intern, Cathryn Garcia-Menocal, Rice architecture students sorted, labeled, and examined each of these components to confirm that it was correctly "CNC-ed," a term for a method of cutting exact shapes designed on a computer and cut by a computer controlled router. Uri Wegman, architect and professor at The Cooper Union, New York and Sarah's longtime studio assistant who knew the project inside and out, solved problems on the fly with Sarah and worked on every stage of assembly, as did Philipp Wiedemann, who flew in from Berlin to assist Sarah with construction. These members of Sarah's core team worked together and even lived and cooked together. Thanks to Lisa

Thompson of the Modern B&B for helping to provide economical and comfortable housing for Sarah, Cat, Uri, and Philipp during their nearly month-long stay.

We are grateful to artists Hana Hillerova and Dana Roy Harper who not only opened their spectacular home to us for the opening after-party, but also provided a sumptuous dinner of homemade food and drink.

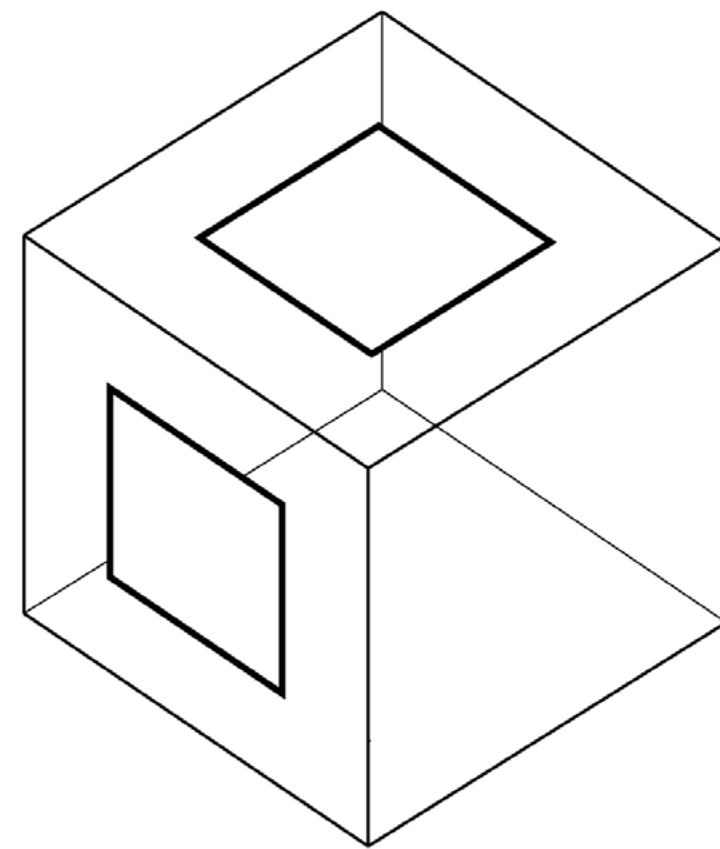
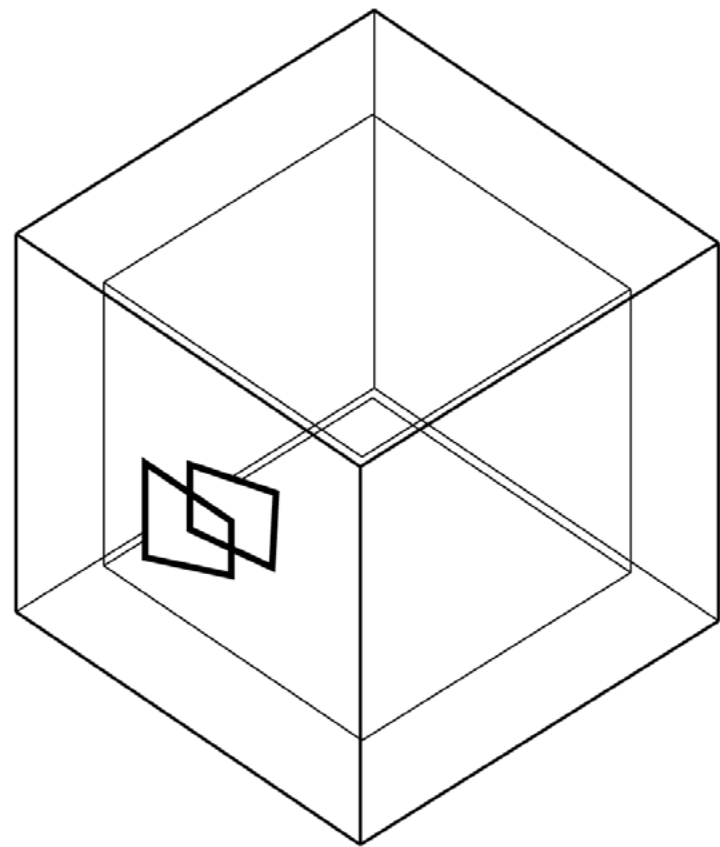
Though we do not normally thank staff members in print, I must make an exception and thank Joshua Fischer, Rice Gallery's Assistant Curator. Without Josh, this installation could not have happened. Josh was in constant communication with Sarah, and with our colleagues who were so critical to this project. For an entire summer it went like this: one day Josh would be tracking down architectural plans that had not seen the light of day in years, and the next he would be filming from a crouched position the cramped crawl space above the gallery ceiling. To Josh, keeper of meticulous notes and records and seeker of creative solutions, nothing was a chore; it was all an adventure. I thank Josh, and every member of small but mighty Rice staff with whom I am privileged to work.

WORMHOLE: a hole that creates a visual and temporal shortcut through a set of discrete locations.



CINEMA HOLE: a hole through which an adjacent space appears as a projected image.

HORIZON HOLE: a hole that distorts the viewer's perception of horizontal and vertical direction.



DIFFUSION HOLE: A hole that simultaneously diffuses direct light and illuminates an obscured sightline.

sarah oppenheimer on D-17

RG: How did your ideas for *D-17* develop?

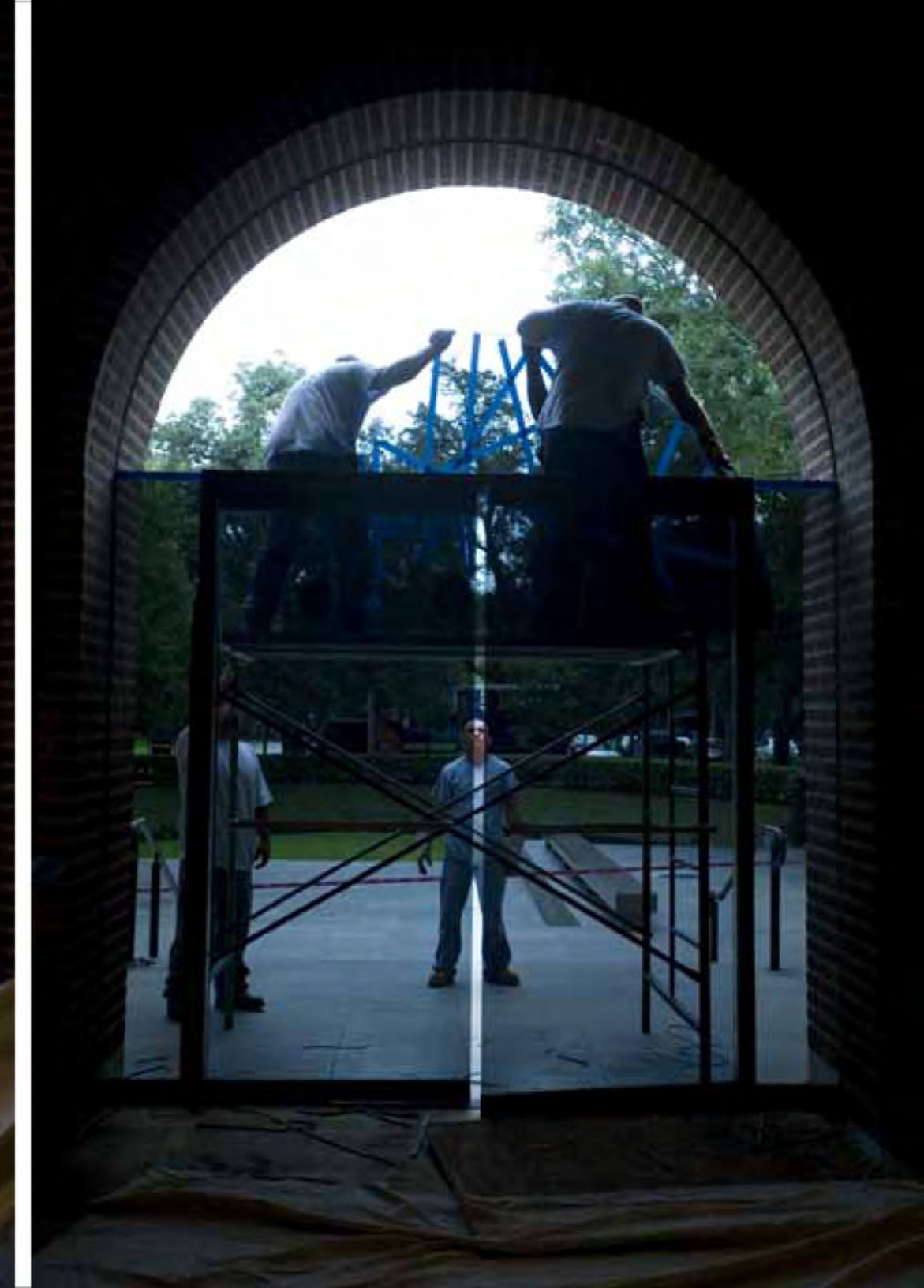
SO: *D-17* developed in response to the specific ways in which daylight and vision pass through the glass wall and into Rice gallery. A light gradient extends from the public courtyard, through the lobby space, and into the deep recesses of the gallery. The dark gray glazing [glass] of the building façade filters the daylight as it enters the lobby space. A second glass wall between the lobby and gallery further diminishes light levels. I was interested in manipulating this light gradient through two complementary strategies: making holes in the glass walls and altering light levels transmitted through the space. The goal was to create a new light gradient nested within the first.

To do this, we removed a large piece of glazing over the center arch, directly above the building's exterior doorway. This subtraction permitted a much brighter and cooler light to enter the building cavity. We then channeled that light as deep into the space as possible along a crease in the surface of *D-17*. The effect of this new light channel was to increase the light levels at certain points along the interior glazing and within the recesses of the gallery.

RG: What were the consequences of this play with light gradients?

SO: The change in light level allows the glass to function as both mirror and window – depending on the position of the viewer. When viewed from the lobby, the glass that bisects the light channel becomes more reflective and acts as a mirror, while the less illuminated glass remains mostly transparent. When viewed from the gallery, the change in light levels heightens the transparency of the glass. From a certain position in the lobby, the reflection in the mirrored glass is identical to the view from the back corner of the gallery.

As the project developed, unexpected visual results occurred. The nighttime experience of the piece was far more interesting than I had anticipated. The building's exterior wall was transformed from a highly reflective, black mirror during the day into a translucent and light-emitting plane at night, inverting the perceptual experience of the piece.





RG: Can you say a bit about the geometry of *D-17*?

SO: The continuity of the piece through the glass was developed so as to optically dissolve the glass barrier. Its geometry simultaneously erased the visual presence of the glass wall while using it to reflect specific sightlines. Its extendedness was an attempt to take it out of a very singular, object-like intervention into something that felt more like a space that you could be on top of or a space that you could be underneath, a kind of mirror of the architecture you're in.

RG: Your work plays with the conventions of architectural space. How does *D-17* relate to past projects?

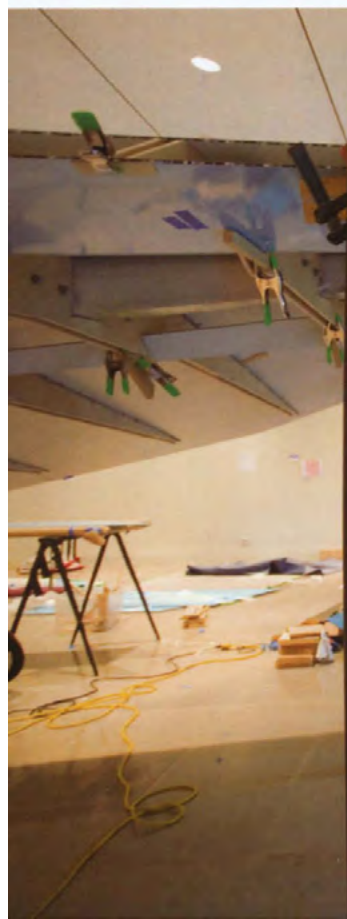
SO: An opening through built space can create an array of perceptual effects. Over the past several years, I have been interested in how holes function as catalysts for dispersion and flow between the cellular spaces of interior architecture. The hole-as-catalyst changes our perception and definition of interior space rather than acting as an object, or even a non-object. My work has developed a series of discrete interventions into architectural places, as well as a more generalizing Typology of Holes. This typology codifies the possibilities of a hole as a catalyst that blurs the rigid divisions of social and architectural space.

D-17 expands and elaborates upon previous interventions, and extends my ongoing development of a Typology of Holes. At Rice Gallery, the glass walls presented a new set of challenges. The semi-transparent surface of the glass walls rendered the discreet spatial zones of the gallery building visible. Light and sight passed through the boundary plane as a preexisting condition of the architectural site of the gallery. The challenge was to blur the occupant's experience of the boundary by manipulating the transparency and reflectivity of this existing surface.

This manipulation was achieved through a double and intersecting hole. The first hole created a channel for the diffusion of direct light along a single axis. A second intersecting hole, inserted as an aperture in *D-17*'s lower surface, used the altered light levels created by the first [hole] to generate a reflected view to the exterior.

The aperture utilized in *D-17* is now designated as a Diffusion Hole. A codified entry into the Typology of Holes, the Diffusion Hole expands on previous hole types. In past projects, holes functioned as manipulators of bodily perception and mnemonic cues. *D-17*, and Diffusion Holes more generally, form new openings in architectural space that divide light and sight along different vectors. This discontinuity of the axis of light and vision, works in tandem to illuminate otherwise unseen views. Holes combine to create new spatial and visual ruptures.











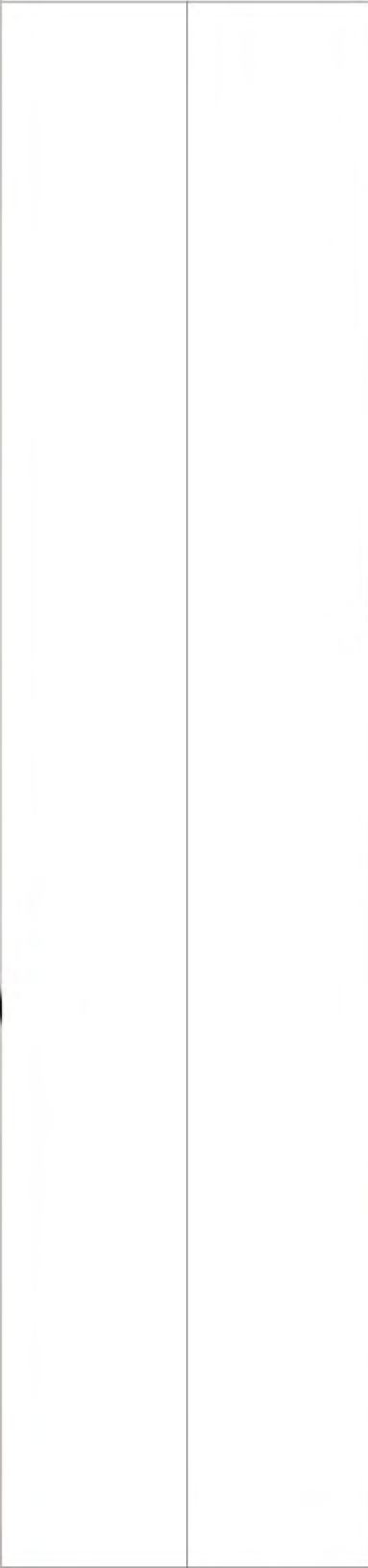






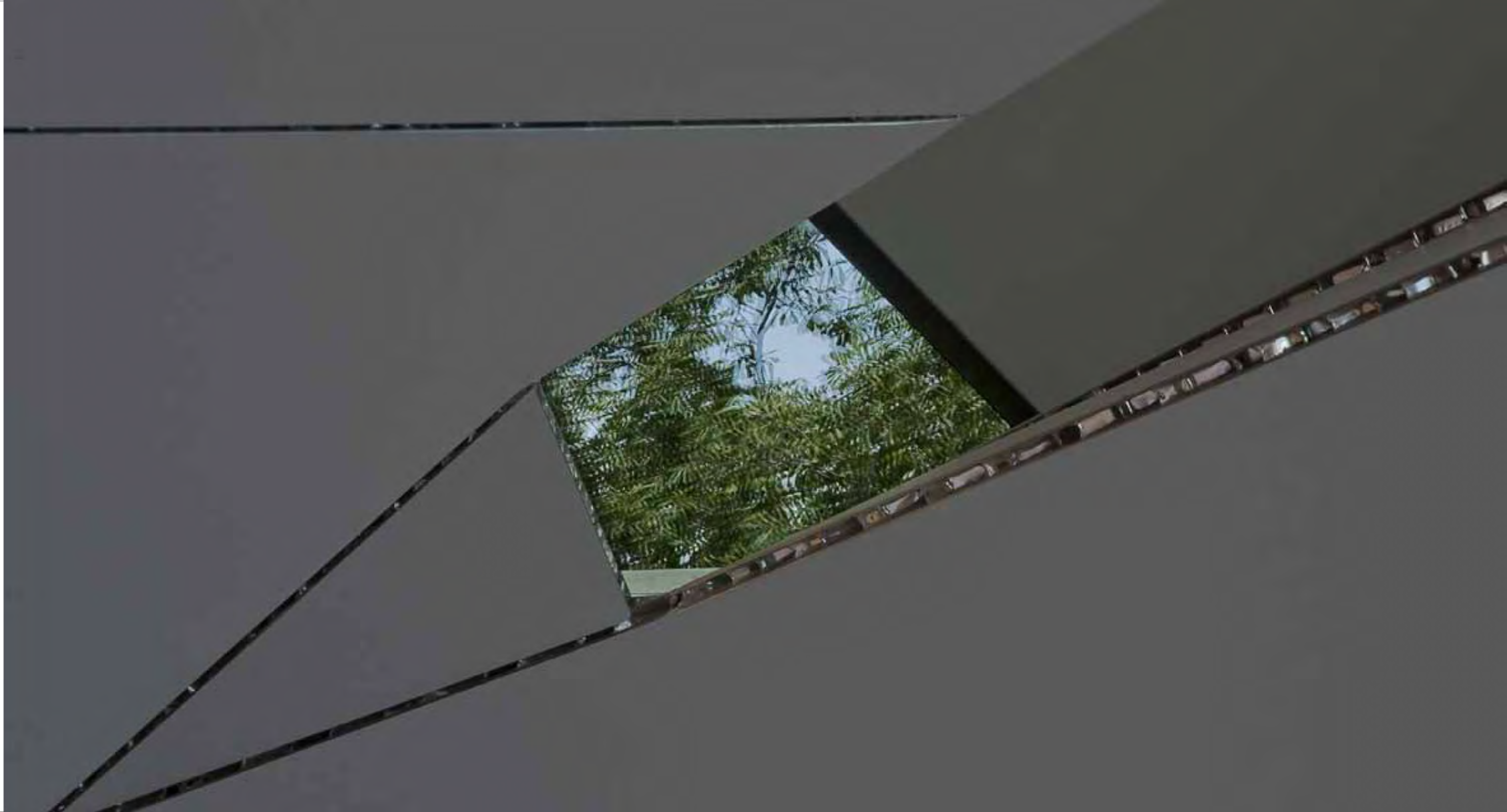


















about the artist Sarah Oppenheimer received a BA in Semiotics from Brown University and an MFA from Yale University, where she is a Critic in the School of Art. She has exhibited nationally and internationally with solo exhibitions at Von Bartha Garage, Basel, Switzerland (2010); Annely Juda Fine Art, London (2009); Art Unlimited @ Art Basel, Switzerland (2009); Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri (2008), and Queens Museum of Art, New York (2008). Group exhibitions include Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, California (2009-10), and the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (2008 - ongoing). Oppenheimer will create installations for upcoming group exhibitions at deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts (2011), and The Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh (2012). A permanent installation commissioned by the Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland is scheduled to open in spring 2012.

Oppenheimer is the recipient of numerous awards including the 2010-11 Gilmore D. Clarke/ Michael Rapuano Rome Prize; New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA) Fellowships in Architecture/ Environmental Structures (2010, 2006); the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Fellowship (2009); the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Art (2007); and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (2007). Sarah Oppenheimer was born in Austin, Texas; she lives in New York.

Sarah Oppenheimer, *D-17*
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Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the campus of Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the web at ricegallery.org.

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Rice University Art Gallery Staff
Kimberly Davenport, Director
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David Krueger, Preparator

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