

I stand  
in my place  
with my  
own day  
here.

Site-Specific  
Art at  
The New School

# I Stand in My Place with My Own Day Here

## **Site-Specific Art at The New School**

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# Brian Tolle

**Threshold**  
2006  
Fiberglass and  
acrylic paint

## The Gentle Wind Doth Move Visibly

Shannon Mattern

**T**YPICALLY RESERVED FOR BOARD MEETINGS and small-scale, invitation-only gatherings, the Dorothy H. Hirshon Suite was not always a venue that The New School's faculty and students visited frequently. Yet I fortuitously found myself attending several meetings there in the spring and summer of 2007, when the Facilities crew seemed to be conducting some sort of drawn-out repair operation behind the room's west wall. A gauzy white scrim skimmed the steel studs and seemed to register, in its billows and ripples, a draft coursing through the building's cavities. Growing up in the hardware business, I'd seen plenty of Tyvek and construction shrink-wrap. But the scrim's protracted presence here, in this dignified conference room named after a glamorous socialite, made me wonder what could possibly be causing such intractable infrastructural maladies.

Then, after months of casual glances, I finally noted that this gossamer veil, which I had admired for so expressively registering the tiniest fluctuations in ventilation, was fixed in frozen undulation. I saw the wall label. My scrim was fiberglass—which made it no less dynamic and articulate. Brian Tolle's computationally modeled and fabricated panels transformed the Hirshon Suite's walls into a respiratory membrane, a *Threshold* between atmospheres, a medium for the exchange of breaths and voices and ideas.

Much of Tolle's work has inhabited the edges—between spaces, times, and materials. He has crafted floppy silicone models of mid-century suburban homes, and draped them over domestic props: ironing boards, chairs, basketball hoops, and wagons (*Levittown*, 2009). He has ornamented Cleveland's public park, Mall B, with classical urns, milled from

PAGES 170–71: Brian Tolle,  
*Threshold*, 2006.

high-density Styrofoam, that appear to be bending with the lake winds (*The Gentle Wind Doth Move Silently Invisibly*, 2005). Inside a Manhattan gallery, he has re-created a low-ceilinged Tudor hall, complete with rough-hewn beams, a formidable charred hearth, and diamond-paned windows that look out upon an idyllic nowhere (*Overmounted Interior*, 1996). He has re-created the twin allegorical figures by Daniel Chester French that once presided over the two ends of the Manhattan Bridge (*Miss Brooklyn* and *Miss Manhattan*, 2016); constructed twisted Styrofoam-brick chimneys (*Simnai Dirdro*, 2010, and *Witch Catcher*, 1997); and transported stones, soil, and flora from County Mayo to re-create a nineteenth-century Irish cottage in Lower Manhattan (*Irish Hunger Memorial*, 2002). Through its range of materials and locations, traversing edge conditions between artificial and organic, here and there, past and present, Tolle's work poses historical and ontological questions about the ways in which sites give objects value, about the material qualities that signal authenticity and locality, about the entanglements of time and place. What does it mean, for instance, to rely on man-made synthetic materials to "authentically" capture the texture and patina of historical building materials, or to "indexically" register environmental conditions—to "freeze" the winds on Lake Erie or the HVAC tremors in the Hirshon Suite?

By resolutely positioning themselves at such thresholds, Tolle's sculptures and installations make palpable, even inhabitable, various political-economic inequalities and infrastructural aberrations. Just as his *Irish Hunger Memorial* sits in the shadow of New York's financial giants in Lower Manhattan, contrasting utter lack with excess, *Threshold* installs a perpetual construction site in an exclusive domain of polished presentations and donor dinners. Just one block away, in another of The New School's *sancta sanctorum*, the walls are again perpetually unsettled; here, José Clemente Orozco's frescoes speak of oppression, revolution, and redemption. While Tolle's fiberglass panels might be less radical in their overt content, I have found them to be breezily provocative in their form.

In simulating the building's subcutaneous structural and ventilation systems, *Threshold* primes the room's inhabitants to be

mechanically and infrastructurally minded in our dinner discussions—to search for errant drafts, leaky pipes, load-bearing walls, and power sources. Tolle's forms introduce incongruities in ambience—disheveled irruptions amidst the room's modernist order—that remind us of the labor, skill, and professional intelligence required to allow our facilities to *facilitate* intellectual labor. Over the years I've joined colleagues and students in the Hirshon Suite to engage in countless discussions that have been shaped—or so I like to imagine—by *Threshold's* environmental and intellectual scaffolding. Here, we've debated the politics of "making," the "right to be forgotten" in an age of Big Data, social justice in the arts, the sociocultural aspects of special economic zones, ethical considerations in cartography, and pedagogical strategies for engaging with social and environmental challenges—all concerns that necessitate the deployment of systematic sensibilities and infrastructural logic.

Rarely have we concluded such discussions with allegiances settled, questions answered, minds made up, consciences clear. Such topics of debate don't lend themselves to neat resolution, nor do they allow us to ignore our own messy complicity in perpetuating the world's injustices and absurdities, or our obligation to make things better. And in simulating "the gentle wind [that] doth move / Silently, invisibly" through the room (to quote William Blake), Tolle's billowing screens might also evoke the presence of other inciting voices: those of The New School's revolutionary founders, of Orozco's oppressed, of today's exploited and disenfranchised—all those who cannot speak audibly, whose passions and pleas register only in a silent ripple, and who depend on us to take up their causes, wave their banners. In that sense, we, too, are thresholds, mediums.

Yet the fixity of Tolle's panels—their arrested undulation—suggests that there is more to this mediating agency. It's not enough to make the silent winds audible. We must also serve as agents through which the breath of our dialogue and the spirit of our commitment are materialized into strong tools and stable scaffoldings for repairing our broken institutional and urban structures, and breathing new life into their frameworks.

Artists + Writers

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