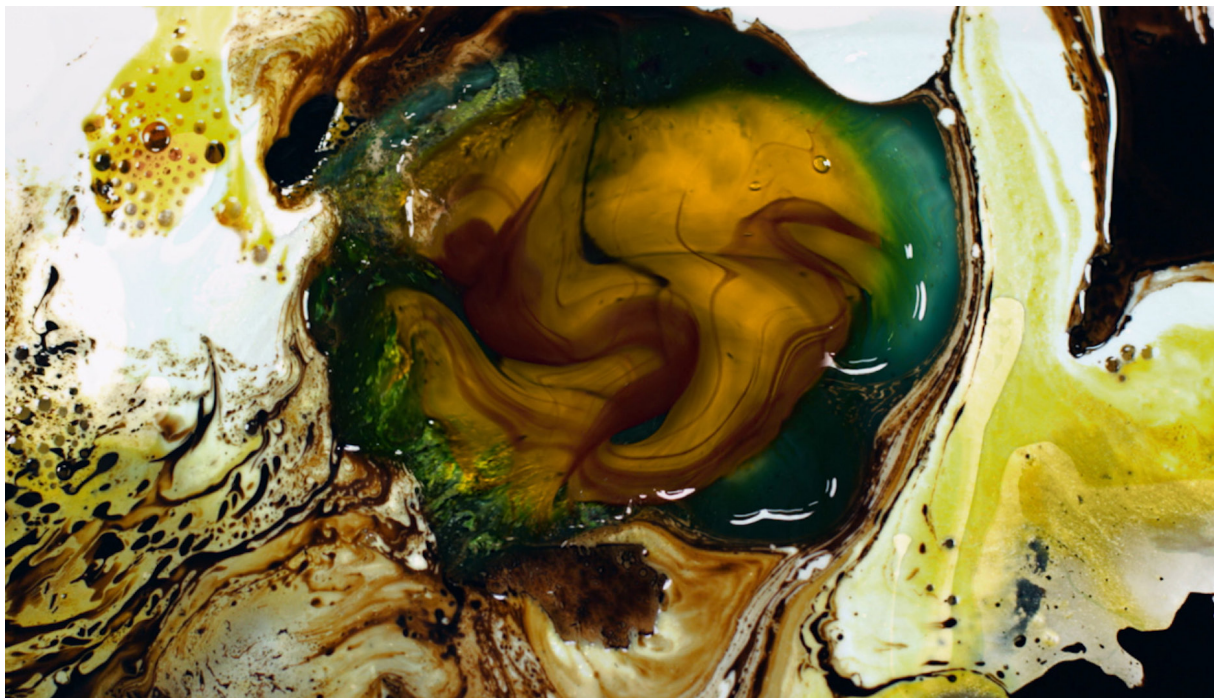


ROOM WITH A VIEW



Rachel Rose, still from *Everything and More*, 2015. High-definition video, color, sound; 11:33 min.; with mylar, PVC, and carpet. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Film, Video, and New Media Committee

By Christopher Y. Lew, Associate Curator

Throughout her work, Rachel Rose (b. 1986) examines how meaning is created, specifically how a variety of moving and still images can be brought together to address unwieldy concerns like mortality, history, and the environment. She processes ideas both intuitively and rationally. Some notions connect instinctually and are conveyed through music, emotion, and rhythm, while others are processed more intellectually. Through the combination of both methods, which yields a lyrical, inquisitive approach that is also precise, Rose tackles some of the most pressing concerns of today.

Rose works primarily with moving pictures and each video requires a long period of research. She culls disparate material as well as her own footage to investigate different topics and locations. These have included death, cryogenics, and zoos for *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* (2013); notions of time expressed through geology and human history for *Palisades in Palisades* (2014); the legacy of Modernism and ecological devastation as encapsulated by Philip Johnson's Glass House in *A Minute Ago* (2014); and for her latest work, *Everything and More* (2015), the experience of human perception in her most expansive site so far: outer space.

Like so much research today, Rose's process is facilitated by the internet and, in part, is shaped by

how information has been increasingly digitized and disseminated online. Despite this, her work is never merely about technology or the glorification of it. Her videos allude to the breadth of human knowledge that exists in digital and analog forms, and she also attempts to find order within the deluge of data. Rose then goes to specific places to capture specific things: the Glass Pavilion at the Toledo Museum of Art designed by SANAA; the different animal environments found in zoos in Washington, DC, San Diego, and the Bronx; and Johnson's aforementioned building in New Canaan, Connecticut. Her investigations have led her to research labs as well. For *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, she visited a robotics facility that designs machines to read human emotions, and for *Everything and More*, a neutral buoyancy lab used to simulate zero



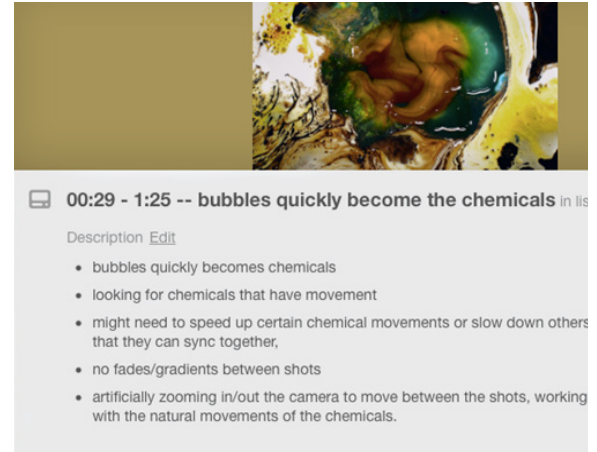
Rachel Rose, still from *Palisades in Palisades*, 2014. High-definition video, color, sound; 9:31 min. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from Lois Plehn

gravity to train astronauts. The process of research and subsequent travel keeps Rose grounded within the world as opposed to hermetically lodged before her computer. Rather than merely lifting footage found through internet searches, Rose engages with the experts who work at these various facilities. The face-to-face interaction and actual experience of visiting different sites is as important to Rose as the video content she captures. Further, when Rose combines her own footage with found imagery, there is little discernable difference, allowing her work to be read as a complete whole rather than a pastiche of found parts.

For each of her videos, which can take a year to create, the footage is meticulously catalogued and tagged in preparation for the editing phase. Her ideas are similarly organized using Trello, an organizational app that is billed as a “visual way to organize anything with anyone.”¹ Rose uses the software to create a storyboard, in which she can shuffle her ideas as if they were on index cards, drawing new connections among the various subjects she is researching. Individual images and video clips are annotated by listing potential sound effects and overdubbed narration, transitions, and camera movements. The raw video and ideas serve as a temporary archive from which Rose makes selections and then arranges the final work.

This editing process, for Rose, becomes the primary act that generates meaning. Overlooked details in her raw footage or happy accidents—for instance, “a red sweater slightly visible in a frame that is supposed to be a close-up of an astronaut suit”²—lead to new connections based on color, form, or serendipitous links between disparate content. Speaking about *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, Rose said, “I treat the editing timeline as a form of perception itself (distinct from the camera), where I find the same vital, shared contingency of living that animals and our bodies actually face.”³

Rose’s approach to editing is greatly influenced by the concepts of Walter Murch, the famed editor of *American Graffiti*, *Apocalypse Now*, and other films. Murch connects perception to the cinematic experience by likening the editor’s cut to blinking, an act that creates discontinuity in human vision. In his book *In the Blink of An Eye*, Murch says: “We must render visual reality discontinuous, otherwise perceived reality would resemble an almost incomprehensible string of letters without word separation or punctuation. When we sit in a dark theater, then we find edited film a (surprisingly) familiar experience.”⁴ The edit becomes an extension of human perception in which each cut is like a



Screenshot of Trello application on Rose’s computer monitor, 2015

semi-conscious blink, a visual caesura that gives structure to what might otherwise be an onslaught of the senses. In Rose’s particular case, editing gives shape to her videos and also alludes to Murch’s idea of the blink by drawing the viewer into the physical installation of the work. Video projections are generally set low to the ground to anchor the work in the gallery architecture and a swath of carpet is often laid to encourage viewers to sit as a way to emphasize the body’s relation to the work.

For *Everything and More*, she integrates an essayistic, expository mode with an idiosyncratic poetry. Through the compilation of seemingly unrelated material—first-person narration, music ranging from gospel to electronic dance music (EDM), and swirling chemicals—she has created a work that goes beyond its constituent parts to address ideas of human perception through direct experience and an emotive sensibility.

The video is structured around interviews Rose conducted with David Wolf, a NASA astronaut who made seven spacewalks throughout his career and spent 128 days aboard the Mir Space Station.⁵ Describing his time in orbit, Wolf speaks of experiences few have had, particularly viewing the Earth from space for the first time. In a 2011 interview, Wolf said: “All astronauts, when they first see it, are literally taken aback by the beauty and the finite nature of the planet . . . It’s Earth in its purest form. There are no borders, and the colors are deeper than can be exhibited in a photograph.”⁶

For Wolf, the return to Earth was a greater adjustment than becoming accustomed to zero gravity. Sensations became more acute; even his own ears felt weighty on his head, as did the watch on his wrist. As he says in Rose’s video: “All these feelings of acceleration and weight and odors . . . are kind of overwhelming after their



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absence for so long in space. Re-adapting to the Earth is even harder than adapting to space.” The sensorial experience of Earth—with all of its colors, scents, and textures—was almost new again. Wolf had to recalibrate how he moved his body and how he perceived the world.

Wolf’s mesmerizing narration is complimented by a second voice, one that emerges suddenly and then quickly fades in a fleeting song. Like a practiced duet, the singer’s voice weaves over and under Wolf’s spoken delivery. These snippets of song are highly manipulated samples of Aretha Franklin’s rendition of *Amazing Grace* sung as part of her acclaimed 1972 performance at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles.⁷ As gospel is intended to do, Franklin’s singing supplies the awe, transcendence, and emotion that Wolf’s dispassionate delivery fails to express.

Rose isolated Franklin’s nonverbal vocalizations by running the audio file through Ableton, an audio editing program that, through its digital spectrograph tool, visualizes the song as a waveform. Rose then can identify, mainly by eye, the parts of the waveform that represent everything but the singer’s voice. Using an eraser tool in the software, she removes these sections which correspond to Franklin’s band and to the lyrics.⁸ The remaining clips of Franklin’s wordless song are further cut and mixed together.⁹ Even after the intense processing of the live recording, Franklin’s performance remains fixed in

its emotional register, communicating to the heart before the brain.

The combination of the two voices makes reference to a lesser-known aspect of United States history. Although Rose was not fully cognizant of it until *Everything and More* was nearly finished, the juxtaposition of Wolf and Franklin’s voices alludes to the secondary role NASA played in its early days, which was to help transform the agrarian economy of the post-Reconstruction South and serve as a progressive proponent of the emerging equal opportunity labor laws. While NASA’s primary mission was to “win” the space race against the Soviet Union, the agency did serve, with various levels of success, as a symbol of the federal government’s burgeoning integrationist policies that were catalyzed by the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁰ Bridging major and minor histories, as well as several decades, *Everything and More*, makes generative use of what are far from arbitrary connections. With this in mind, the introductory remarks to Franklin’s performance carry deep resonance when the Reverend James Cleveland says to the live audience, “we want you to, you know, let the folk know you’re here.”¹¹

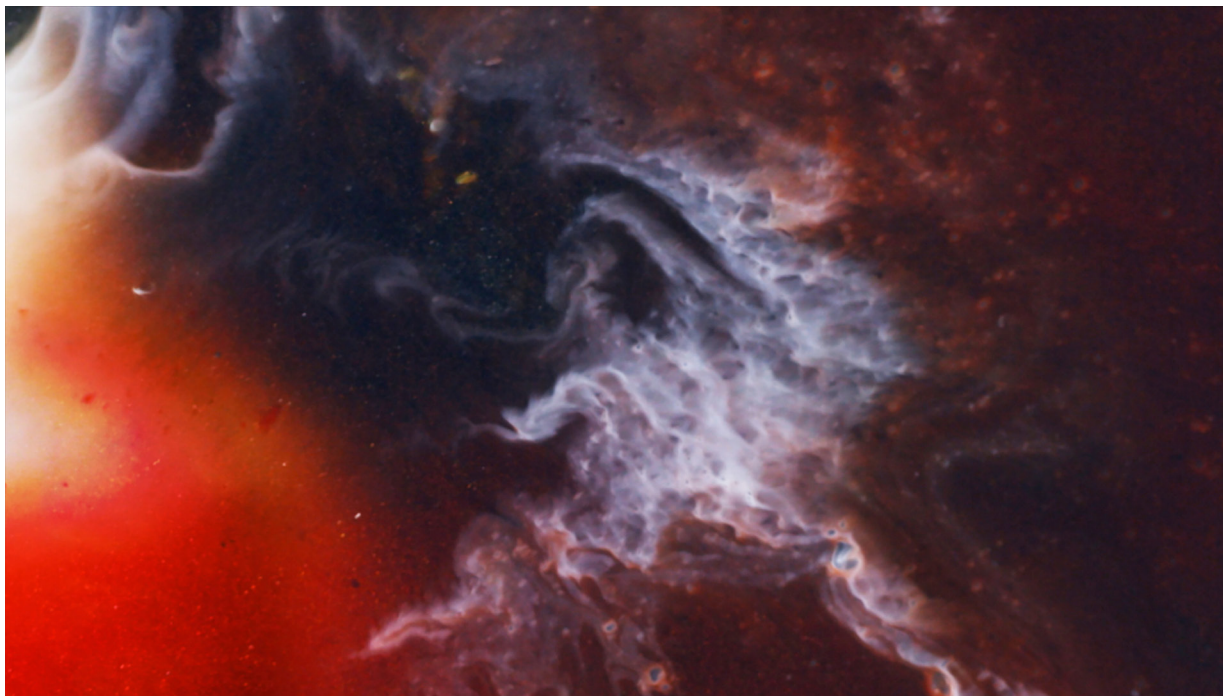
Aboard the Mir Space Station for nearly four months, Wolf watched films as a way to connect back to the people on the ground. By watching movies, he said, “I felt like I was in them. They were like a

contact with Earth rather than just cracking voices over a radio.”¹² It is ironic that Wolf tried to retain his connection to humanity through film and the depictions of outer space have been largely dominated by the entertainment industry and the use of special effects.

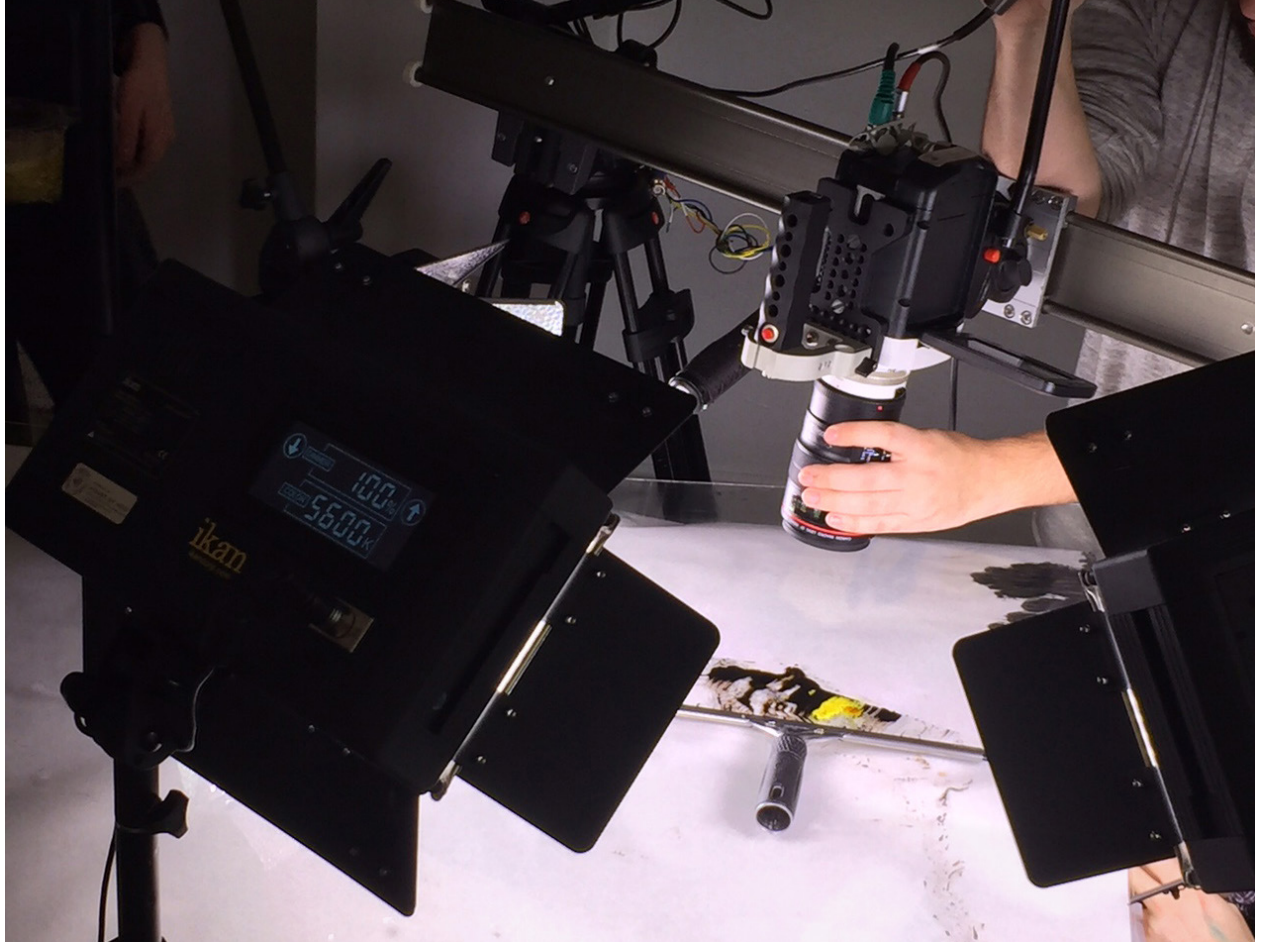
The abstractions Rose generated for *Everything and More* are decidedly lo-fi and are not to be mistaken for the computer-generated imagery that is currently ubiquitous in Hollywood blockbusters. Rose’s liquid effects were produced by mixing household liquids and foodstuffs. She created what she calls “chemistry experiments” by combining milks of various fat content, as well as other products like food dyes, water, olive oil, and baby oil on glass plates, which she then filmed from above with a Phantom camera. “To manipulate the movement of the mixtures,” Rose says, “I used an air compressor (the kind pastry chefs use) and sometimes mixed in Ferrofluid (magnetized liquid) with the food dye and moved that around by holding magnets under the chemicals under the glass.”¹³ Subsequently, she edited different “experiments” together in Adobe Premier and further animated portions of the footage using After Effects. While these images are not intended to be interpreted as direct depictions of space, Rose did use NASA imagery of the Earth as a reference. Combined with Wolf’s narration, it is difficult not to draw parallels to his descriptions of the Milky Way. Forms arise, one

from another, like gaseous planets being birthed from the cosmic muck, and bits of curdled milk drift in the darkness like distant bodies or flotsam left in the wake of a comet’s tail.

Rose’s material-based approach to creating abstract, moving images is influenced in part by the filmmaker Jordan Belson. A pioneer in experimental film who passed away in 2011, he created evocative, cosmic imagery by shooting materials on an optical bench. Highly secretive of his methods, Belson set up his San Francisco studio, according to Gene Youngblood, as “essentially a plywood frame around an old X-ray stand with rotating tables, variable speed motors, and variable intensity lights.”¹⁴ With this system, Belson filmed tabletop abstractions that expressed the expansiveness of both space and spirituality. His 1964 short film, *Re-Entry*, was inspired by John Glenn’s first journey into outer space and *bardo*, a transitional state between death and rebirth in Buddhism. The six-minute work features a range of sounds and imagery: a grid of white points that seems to bend to create a sense of perspective; hazy, shifting atmospheric reds, yellows, greens, and blues that cascade downwards and lift upwards; stock footage of the sun captured as a brilliant circle; a powerful roar similar to a rocket engine; eerie electronic tones; and, hidden in the soundtrack, even Glenn’s radio communications with NASA.¹⁵ Loosely structured in sections, *Re-Entry* conflates an astronaut’s lift-off, the exit from Earth’s



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Rose shooting *Everything and More* in her New York studio, 2015

atmosphere, and ultimate return with Buddhism's cycles of death and reincarnation.¹⁶ The combination of science, religion, and material-based special effects established a strong precedent for Rose's latest video.

The presentation of *Everything and More* at the Whitney takes advantage of the architecture of the Museum's George and Mariana Kaufman, Kaufman Astoria Studios Gallery. Akin to the pianos John Cage modified by adding screws and bolts to the instrument's strings to make his music,¹⁷ Rose specially prepared the gallery with a theatrical scrim and light-blocking films in order to calibrate the light levels in the room. Rose's video is projected toward a set of floor-to-ceiling windows that look east onto a large outdoor terrace and the Manhattan cityscape. Rather than blocking the windows entirely, Rose covered them with semi-transparent Mylar that eliminates most but not all of the natural light. A scrim onto which the work is projected is installed a few feet in front of the covered windows. This

configuration is carefully calibrated to block out enough ambient light for the video to be exhibited and yet, during the dimmest portions of the work when the projection is nearly dark, it allows the viewer to see through the scrim and the windows to perceive the world beyond the gallery.

Rose's use of scrims as part of her prepared gallery recalls the work of Robert Irwin, but this connection is not merely superficial. Her installation is largely in keeping with Irwin's notion of site-conditioned art, which is a "sculptural response" that "draws all of its cues (reasons for being) from its surroundings." It responds to the architecture and scale of the gallery in addition to landscape or cityscape in which it is located, and "natural events" like "snow, wind, sun angles, sunrise, water, etc." that may exist.¹⁸ Rose's installation is one that is in dialogue with its environs, making use of a gallery that has been designed to provide natural light and exhibit video art. The artist went as far as studying how the light interacts with the space, examining models of where the sun is positioned during the fall

and winter seasons of the exhibition, and conducting multiple tests on-site with sample materials.

This knowledge of the conditions of display allows for the final climatic moment of the video. As Wolf describes his experience floating in space at the end of his long tether, looking out at the vastness of space undistracted by his space suit and artificial lights, the video grows dim and the outside world beyond the gallery emerges. Meanwhile, white highlights of Rose's liquid abstractions float in the near field, creating a situation in which the viewer becomes aware of her own perception—an experience of seeing that one generally takes for granted. Rather than encouraging a visual experience that deemphasises the body, as in traditional cinema, Rose elegantly evokes a heightened corporal and mental awareness by revealing the world directly before one's eyes.

1. Fog Creek Software, Inc., "Trello," Version: 3.1, <http://trello.com>, accessed July 31, 2015.

2. Lauren Cornell, "We Have Always Been in the End Times: A Conversation Between Lauren Cornell, Rachel Rose, and Ben Russell," *Mousse Magazine*, no. 49 (June 2015), 232–39.

3. Laura McLean-Ferris, "A State of Constant Becoming," *Mousse Magazine*, no. 40 (September 2013), 146–49.

4. Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press 2001). 63.

5. National Aeronautics and Space Administration, "David A. Wolf (BSEE, M.D.)," <http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/Bios/htmlbios/wolf.html>, accessed July 15, 2015.

6. Ker Than, "Shuttle Astronaut's Four Most Extraordinary Moments," *National Geographic News* (July 6, 2011), <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2011/07/110706-shuttle-launch-astronaut-moments-space-atlantis-science/>, accessed July 31, 2015.

7. Aretha Franklin, *Amazing Grace: the Complete Recordings, Atlantic*, 1999, compact disc.

8. Rose cites as one influence Aphex Twin's *Windowlicker* (1999). Taking advantage of the spectrograph's visualizations, Aphex Twin used it to created hidden visual compositions associated with each track on the EP. See <http://www.aphextwin.nu/learn/99906995499023.shtml>, accessed July 31, 2015.

9. Rachel Rose, correspondence with the author, July 15, 2015.

10. Richard Paul and Steven Moss, *We Could Not Fail: The First African Americans in the Space Program* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).

11. Reverend James Cleveland, "Opening remarks," in Aretha Franklin, *Amazing Grace: the Complete Recordings, Atlantic*, 1999, compact disc.

12. Ryan Buxton, "Retired Astronaut David Wolf: Being In Space 'So Extreme' That It's Nearly Indescribable," *The Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/07/retired-astronaut-david-wolf-space-extreme_n_3720180.html, accessed July 31, 2015.

13. Rachel Rose, correspondence with the author, July 15, 2015.

14. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970), 158.

15. *Ibid.*, 163, 166.

16. *Ibid.*, 163.

17. John Cage, "How the Piano Came to Be Prepared," http://johncage.org/prepared_piano_essay.html, accessed July 31, 2015. Originally published as the foreword in Richard Bunger, *The Well-Prepared Piano* (Colorado Springs: The Colorado College Music Press, 1973).

18. Robert Irwin and Lawrence Weschler, *Being and Circumstance: Notes toward a Conditional Art* (Larkspur Landing, CA: Lapis Press in conjunction with the Pace Gallery and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1985), 27.