



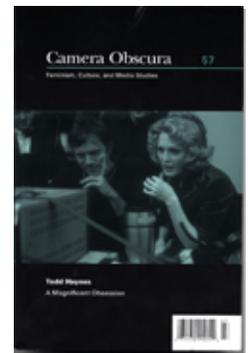
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Some Kind of Grace: An Interview with Miranda July

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Camera Obscura, 55 (Volume 19, Number 1), 2004, pp. 180-197 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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Miranda July. Courtesy Miranda July

Some Kind of Grace: An Interview with Miranda July

Julia Bryan-Wilson

“I come from very far away. I come from the basement.” This line, from one of Miranda July’s sound pieces (“I Can-Japan,” on the CD *The Binet-Simon Test*, issued by the indie rock label Kill Rock Stars), captures the absurd logic that pervades her art. July’s work inhabits *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny space—a world in which the familiar or close at hand is suddenly made foreign. Her prodigious output, which includes CDs, videos, online projects, multimedia performances, visual art, and short stories, defies straightforward description, but uniting this diverse oeuvre is her ability to unearth secrets and dig beneath the faulty foundations of domesticity. July is interested in the impulses that lurk just under the surface: the monsters that dwell in the basement and either speak our deepest fears or embody our most extreme fantasies.

Developing complex tableaux with the use of her body, voice, sound, and video effects, she presents multiple characters (often played by July herself) who attempt to navigate and manage the world around them through complicated systems of control. The scenarios she presents are sometimes otherworldly or fantastic—a secret agent from another planet infiltrates a nuclear

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Camera Obscura 55, Volume 19, Number 1
Published by Duke University Press

family, a woman buries herself in her backyard—but like the best science fiction, they strike one as profoundly true. She also has an expansive sense of humor, and with it she plumbs the small, sweet hopes inside us and reacquaints us with the abidingly strange and beautiful human touch.

July, a twenty-nine-year-old artist based in Portland, Oregon, has been hailed as “the most engaging performance artist at work today (period)” and “an *enfant terrible* of the punk scene.”¹ Often likened to the performances of Laurie Anderson or the early films of Chantal Akerman, July’s work traffics in both the severe and the banal conditions of contemporary life: environmental illness, family dynamics, obsolescing technology, surveillance, and medical experimentation. In her live performances *Love Diamond* (1998) and *The Swan Tool* (2001), the participatory elements are reminiscent of the art of Yoko Ono, while her portrayal of multiple characters brings to mind the theatricality of Cindy Sherman. But such comparisons are strained, not only because July does so much but also because her art, whatever form it eventually takes, rushes out of her with an explosive force, and trying to explain it can feel like trying to sculpt water.

For the past eight years, July has been part of a broad community of artists, musicians, and filmmakers in the Pacific Northwest. Often working with very little money, and springing from homegrown, hybrid gallery/music spaces, Portland artists have cultivated a distinctive scene encouraging crossover between the arts. This sense of possibility helped July foster and deepen her experiments in multiple media. Her collaborative video projects were initially sparked through her association with the explicitly feminist alternative culture forged by young women through fanzines, punk bands, and do-it-yourself aesthetics. It was partly her involvement in this DIY culture that led her to found Joanie 4 Jackie (formerly Big Miss Moviola), an independent, woman-made video distribution system that allows women and girls to share their work with each other and to find bigger audiences. It is, as she puts it, “a challenge and a promise”: if a woman makes a video, it will get seen. Every video that is sent to Joanie 4 Jackie is put on a compilation tape with nine other videos and then sent



Joanie 4 Jackie logo. Courtesy Miranda July

back to all the participants. These random selections of ten shorts function like a chain letter, circulating amongst the women and providing a system of feedback. Participants are encouraged to correspond with each other, and contact information is found in the booklet that accompanies each tape. Many of the videos sent to Joanie 4 Jackie are low- or no-budget, with submissions coming in from anywhere from New York City to Norman, Oklahoma. Since its inception in 1995, Joanie 4 Jackie has produced fifteen chain-letter tapes which have been screened at film festivals around the world. Joanie 4 Jackie also distributes more selective compilations called the Co-Star tapes, pulled together by young women who are self-fashioned curators.

July started writing and directing plays at the age of sixteen, and since then she has been featured in art exhibitions and film festivals around the world, including the Whitney Biennial, the International Film Festival in Rotterdam, New York's Museum of Modern Art, and the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. Her videos—*Atlanta* (1996), *The Amateurist* (1998), *Nest of Tens* (2000), *Getting Stronger Every Day* (2001), and *Haysha Royko* (2003)—have won independent video awards in the United States and internationally. Recently, her large-scale photographs, the *Dot Pictures*, were shown at the Tom Landowski Gallery in Seattle, Washington. With the help of the Sundance screenwriter's lab, she is currently working on a feature-length movie. We sat down with a tape recorder one chilly spring afternoon in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, to talk about her recent work and wandered into other, more tangential territories.

Julia Bryan-Wilson: You move between performance, visual art, recording, online art, and video making. This can confound those who try to categorize you. For instance, your work was represented in three different media in the 2002 Whitney Biennial—a sound installation, a video, and a live performance, and crossed the artificial boundaries that the art world itself has set up. This question may fall into the trap of trying to fit you too neatly into a single definition, but is there one medium that you most relate to?

Miranda July: On the subway today I was thinking about the desire, in so many different areas of my life, to be allowed to change, to remember to allow myself to change. In that sense, I always want the edges of my practice to be moving so that I don't become wed to a particular shape. But if there is one central medium, it is writing. Much of the work I've done in the past two years is writing. Soon these things will be out in the world!² But my computer knows I'm a writer.

Much of what you do, even in your performance and video, has such a strong writerly element, particularly your use of voice. Although it is highlighted most in your sound works, your voice is not just a versatile tool but the motor, the engine, of a lot of your work.

I don't even believe it's my voice when I do characters. It seems so vast to me, like channeling. I guess that's a good sign if it seems like the entire world. If the voice is the primary source, then each medium provides different and interesting limitations. Even as I write short stories, I am whispering the whole time I'm writing, acting it out, testing the rhythm. Often the rhythm comes before the words do. I think, "I need something that goes, 'bum, bu-bum, bu-bum-bum.'"

A lot of what you create is satisfying, old-fashioned storytelling. Even as you integrate innovative kinds of technology, it's the sheer force of the characters and plot that drives the pieces along. The segment of your live performance Love Diamond, for instance, which involves a housewife who was sent from another planet, has a conventional dramatic arc to it. She learns to inhabit this alien world and love it, even though she is instructed not to, and we see her struggle with that. Other times you seem interested in finding the minimum scaffolding possible for suggesting a narrative: In the CD commissioned by the Whitney, The Drifters, there is a very short sound work in which a couple is watching their house go up in flames. It's less than two minutes, and it contains a whole world. This feels different from a lot of other technology-driven artists.

Oh, yes, my God, technology-driven artists. Sometimes I am on panels with them, and we actually have to talk about technology. I

can't tell you how little of my mind is allotted for technology; just the bare minimum. And yet I continue to have idea after idea that requires not only technology but invention. Perhaps I really like surprising invention, the elegant solution, the simple trick that has a big effect. I grew up on *Mission: Impossible* (1966–73, 1988–90) and helping my big brother with his carpentry, so I do enjoy this way of thinking, but only at the service of a great story, of a feeling.

The past few performances you've done, such as Love Diamond and The Swan Tool, utilized projected digital video—both live and prerecorded—your own moving body, and elaborate live soundtracks (composed and played by Zac Love). You have referred to these works as “live movies.” They are incredibly rigorous in terms of the control you need to have over the technology. The video projections—which you use as moving scenic backdrops—have to be cued exactly, and the seamless timing all contributes to the feeling that we're watching a kind of parallel universe. They seem physically quite demanding, but also create a total, engrossing atmosphere when you're on stage. It seems that, largely for technical reasons, these works have had to be highly regimented. Are you getting more interested in a freer structure?

I felt very satisfied with how *The Swan Tool* was built, but it signaled the end of trying for that kind of polish. Compared with other people's megatours, I actually haven't performed that much. This is because I find it kind of intolerable doing a performance without much relationship to the place or the people, basically doing it as a job. Now I want to come to a place and have the work completed by the people there. Like at one point a boy in the audience stands up and plays the *Rocky* (dir. John G. Avildsen, US, 1976) theme song on his trumpet, and that's my accompaniment for that part, so I need to find that boy. I did a show at the Warhol Museum, where at certain points people from the audience would come backstage and do a monologue that was partly improvised—they were responding to questions on paper—and partly read, scripted. But because they were backstage talking into a microphone, this was all a secret, and I think, I hope, that in moments, it seemed like they were just freestyling. They were, in

moments. People are beautifully straight-faced if you can choose the nonactors, the nonhams. When it worked, it just made me feel like crying or shouting, I was so overwhelmed with emotion. And this was during my own show! What a gift to get that inspiration and then be able to directly funnel it into the performance, with no thinking in between. Now that I am not so consumed with just surviving, I can move on to the next level, which is, how can I enjoy living more? And the interaction with people seems to be key. I don't meet as many people as I thought I would when I travel. If I don't invite people into my work, then I only meet the people who have the money.

What inspired you to go in this direction? Were you simply worn out from the physical demands of your previous performances, and do you think this will lead incrementally to more improvisation in your live performances?

One specific thing that kicked me was seeing a documentary called *Step across the Border* about Fred Frith, a musician who would travel around the world making music and working with the people he met. I also have a lot of friends who work in this way, to greater and lesser extremes. Whether or not it's always relevant to what I'm actually doing, it's a model I keep in my head because much of what I do is so solitary.

The improvisation in your work is a way of experimenting with new models of relating, then, new ways of interacting with other people not just in the context of art making but in life.

If I'm going to travel so much, I'd like to have the emphasis be not so much on just the shows, but being in people's homes and learning about them. I don't even want to keep doing it anymore the way I've been doing it. I actually dread it; I dread leaving my house.

*That's interesting since much of your work is set in generic, almost eerily hermetic houses. In *Love Diamond* you use a stereotypical suburban house as scenery, and it is very familiar to us even though it doesn't exist, and then it gets made strange as the piece progresses and becomes an ana-*

log to a pod or spaceship. There's this line in which the mother tells the daughter, who is ill from environmental toxins, that perhaps the allergy is more interpersonal, and a response to the bad dynamics of the family, than it is architectural.

There's a lot of this in *The Swan Tool* also—the family home as incredibly self-indulgent, but not in a judgmental way. If your mind is racing all the time and seething and pounding with energy and activity, you want to be in some sort of padded environment because anything else might be dangerous. This is something I relate to, a frenzy that needs a calming space. The odd thing about manic activity is how you can often feel like you are moving very, unbearably, slowly.

Well, the title of your first CD is 10 Million Hours a Mile, which pinpoints that dream feeling where there is an incredibly distant goal, but you can only inch along. You often play with distorted times and distances; in one of your sound works, a character asks, "Do you want to go home now? Do you know where that is? That's right—the moon. Do you know how we get there? That's right. We walk." It's an impossibility, and yet maybe if we walk far enough, we just might make it.

Exactly. I felt it then, and I still do.

Does this agoraphobia relate to the first impulses you had to start Joanie 4 Jackie? Joanie 4 Jackie is a way for women to see other women's art without, essentially, ever having to leave their houses. You've had tapes sent to you by women who live places with very limited resources, with no base of connections. They want to see what else is out there, and they want their work to be shown, but they have no idea where to go to hook into any sort of artistic circle.

Joanie 4 Jackie was really built to help me create a space for myself, for other women too, but most urgently for myself, that was filled with warmth. I needed that warm space in order to take massive risks in my life. But now I have that place inside of me, and so it's hard to reignite that need. For a while, I said you had to be under fifteen or over fifty to participate in the project. I only cared about people who were in some ways isolated—the over-

fifty cutoff was because our culture is so youth-obsessed, especially for women. But I would have to do serious outreach to make that work, which could happen if I had more time. It really seems like I need to give the project away to someone or a group of people. People who could really use it to propel themselves as I did. I think that is what'll happen next. I'll give the project away. It's kind of like giving away the coolest jacket you ever had and realizing it actually looks better on some other girl, and that she's going to do some amazing things in that jacket.³

You've said that the impetus for Joanie 4 Jackie came out of your own artistic isolation. Do you now feel on the periphery of the "mainstream" artistic community—if there is such a thing—because you live in Portland? It seems like an intentional position. Portland as a space figures into your work a lot, and a certain West Coast regionalism often creeps in or informs what you do.

At the time when I started Joanie 4 Jackie, I could barely see outside of the room I was in and it, and my work as a whole—the CDs and early videos—were like a message in a bottle. Now I have this more global sense. But it only becomes more and more clear what needs to be sustained: your soul and your body. Moving out from there, the room you are in needs to feel safe and quiet enough that you can concentrate. And then the neighborhood and the city. Being in New York right now makes it obvious to me that Portland does function, in the same way that my body does. I don't have to blow black stuff out of my nose for an hour after I come home. Maybe things could be quicker, but it works, and it feels good. I have a huge amount of energy at the end of the day because it doesn't take energy just to survive in it.

In your work, a lot of the action happens in public spaces such as street corners or sidewalks—driving, for instance, repeatedly figures into The Swan Tool since the main character works as a car unlocker. And in your video Nest of Tens, two of the main narrative threads happen in the airport and a faceless lecture hall. Sometimes the urban areas are very recognizable as Portland—this goes back to the regionalism in your work—but

often they are very anonymous, bland corporate sites. Was any of this influenced by growing up in Berkeley, which has to be one of the weirdest cities in the United States?

The first half of my career could probably fall under the heading of “teenage rebellion”—I was embarrassed about where I was from, and so I didn’t use the details of Berkeley. I grew up two blocks from Telegraph Avenue, which is a place where people lunge out into you and tell you these intense things about the government, and you’re only ten years old. Now I can see that a lot of what I thought was only my weird town or my weird family was actually generational and related to class. So now I can combine those details with the kind of working-class qualities of Portland. In *The Drifters*, there are a few pieces about this. One thing that was definitely up in the air when I was growing up was the sense of boundaries. In *The Drifters*, one of the teachers is being reprimanded for loving the children too much. And it does walk the line, and you wonder, is she doing something bad, or is she just a really great teacher? I had a lot of hippie teachers like that. Why is it that I knew about sex *surrogates* right around the time I first learned about sex? You couldn’t just know the facts or just the facts and their raunchy, dirty counterparts, you also had to know their holistic, sometimes sleazy, therapeutic versions. I have a bunch of mixed feelings about children being brought into adults’ worlds, but also not really being in them. The boundaries are already confused, and I’m just trying to show how it feels.

Also, we were raised in the early seventies when people were trying to figure out how to make a new world. In a sense we—the children of the sixties generation—were the ultimate experiment to see what rules should stay and what rules should be broken.

It was all very unclear, but there was the wonderful sense that, even as a child, you could maybe get your way by speaking the truth of the universe.

The difference between children and adults acts as a potent metaphor for unexpected assertions of power. You often suggest, and this is an explosive

suggestion, that while of course there is a child/adult inequality, sometimes the child can wield some of the power. In Nest of Tens, it becomes clear that in the interaction between a little girl and a businesswoman, the woman is just craving the little girl's attention.

Yes, maybe you're being used, but you're also needed, and if you're needed, you have a certain power, and once you know that, you can be a manipulator—or a teacher. A therapist told me once that all sex workers raise their children to be sex workers. What she meant was they raise their children to be people who could see and have the desire to become what was missing in people. For a while there, I was realizing I could create my identity in relation to every single person I was with based on the negative space in them that I could fill. And that is a huge power, when you are the thing that someone else wants.

Lots of your work feeds on this dynamic, which is the shifting of power between two people in unexpected ways. In fact, it often takes the form of conversations, especially dyadic structures. In your short video Atlanta, this dyad is a mother and a daughter, and the sound pieces in The Drifters are a series of short vignettes in the form of two-person dialogues, with you playing both roles.

My work is shifting a little. Now people are more doubtful; they're not so stuck in one particular role in opposition to something else. That's where I am. It's actually easier to be doubtful than to have to know.

You have also been involved in collaborations in rather unexpected places, such as your artist's residency at the Miami Beach High School in Florida. There you worked with teenagers to help them make with their own hands what they most wanted; one student, for example, wanted a better ending for a Hollywood movie he'd seen. So you had that student make an alternate ending and tape over the one he didn't like. Another student wanted a specific shirt from the mall that she couldn't afford, so another girl in the class sewed it for her. And in Learning to Love You More, your online collaboration with Harrell Fletcher, you give assignments for others to fulfill, like "Make a paper replica of your bed," or "Make a poster of shad-

ows.” *All kinds of people from all over the world respond to this and go out and create these objects or perform these scenarios and post them on the Web site. In your work with teenagers in public schools, and then in your work within the film/video/performance world, do you feel like you have multiple publics?*

Yes, but people are moving between these worlds themselves, especially young people. One second they are in college, ordering from Kill Rock Stars, and the next second they are working at the museum bookstore in charge of video buying. It’s more the funding sources that are divided. It’s amazing how separate the performance world, which is in many respects almost the dance world, is from the art world. It’s different in a museum: they are palaces of administration, and the art is almost never spoken about directly. Then there is the literary crew—that’s really where I come from, since my parents are writers and publishers. Ultimately there are just individual people who live with some kind of grace, whatever the medium. But I do think I benefit from the cross-pollination.

What is your relationship, specifically, to the visual arts?

Actually today I was meeting a friend at the Metropolitan Museum, and we didn’t have an arranged meeting place. I was on the steps the whole time, but she combed the whole place looking for me, thinking, “Where would Miranda go?” She went up to the surrealist paintings and some other exhibits, and when she found me outside, she said, “So where would you have gone?” And I thought, “Maybe the bathroom?” It didn’t occur to me to go into the art part. But in general, I’m in this space where I’m very receptive to being struck by things. Like when you always thought that hardwood floors were the only way to go, but then you realize that carpet is actually pretty great because you can lay down on it, and you can have sex on it. With art I feel like a lot of things are like that now. I’ll look at something that initially seems boring, and then suddenly it will open up this whole world inside me; but I guess this is true of everything, not just art.

Let's talk about your feature-length digital movie in progress, Me and You and Everyone We Know. It draws on some of your previous work in that it is a series of stories woven together about connectivity and desire and control and sex and tragedy.

Some of the characters are familiar in certain ways. There are children in it—the children are so much easier to write authentically. There's one character based on my cobbler friend in Portland and will be played by him. There's one character that may be played by me, if I can get it made before I age another ten years. She was very hard for me. I had to realize it was OK to have a character that was an artist. She also drives a cab for the elderly—an Eldercab, so she has conversations with people. In *The Swan Tool*, there is a character who works at a life insurance company and is a car unlocker, and there are some similarities there. But this is feature length and much more complicated in terms of its narrative.

Is it a similar structure to Nest of Tens, in which multiple unrelated stories are intercut with each other?

Yes, but everyone interacts eventually. It's much more intertwined, and there's some element of surprise when people end up knowing each other. Probably the thing that's most similar to *Nest of Tens* is the relationship between the child and the woman. I'm trying to figure out how to have a romance between an adult and a child that isn't offensive, that somehow gets it. Because it is something that exists in the world, even though we can't deal with it. It's almost a symbol of what we're not getting to have because of fear and systems based on fear. In the feature and in *Nest of Tens*, and of course I only realized this later, but the crescendo is that the child touches the adult's hair.

What about that gesture is so potent for you?

When someone touches your hair, it's not something that can touch back. You have to be totally passive. It can't even move towards them in response. You have to be a child when someone is touching your hair. You can't even really see it, so it's utter surrender.

And yet it's totally safe. It's one of the things that people are allowed to touch. And this sounds like someone else's bad metaphor for my work, but hair also is like antennae or something reaching out into the world, some kind of receiver. It's a way of communicating.

Is directing something you're looking forward to? You've already had some experience—you directed the video for Sleater-Kinney's "Get Up," for example, and of course your shorter video works, but this project is much more involved.

It seems daunting, but I think that as far as skills go, the skill to help people feel comfortable enough to be free and shine—that is a skill I would like to have, as a person and not just as a director.

Your work comes out of so many different traditions: avant-garde feminist film, Fluxus, punk, experimental fiction. Who are your sources or inspirations?

I guess there are a few types of inspirations. There is just great work, like the music of Virgil Shaw or an Agnes Varda movie. Then there are things that are kind of strange and messed up, and for this reason they give you new space to have ideas in, like the documentaries of Ross McElwee. Then there are people who maybe you don't even love their work that much, but the *way* they do it, the life they lead, is totally inspiring. In a way these are the most important kind of inspirations because there are too few examples of how to live. Any old thing can give me a new idea, but when I see a person who is doing good work, usually outside the system, and seems happy, and perhaps they've even figured out how to have a relationship with some other complicated person—those are the people who I never forget. When I am frustrated with this or that institution, I invoke these people in my mind, and they kind of put it all into perspective.

You have often been linked to other young feminist video makers such as Elisabeth Subrin and Kristin Lucas. How do you feel about this generational grouping of women video makers?

I like the connections, but I also feel connected to artists not related by age or gender. I really like the work of Franz West, an Austrian artist. One of his sculptures is in the *The Swan Tool*, sitting on a table, and even though we performed it in Austria, no one picked up on it. But as far as making a career, I feel really connected to those women and their actual lives.

We were both raised by seventies feminists and then went to college in the early nineties and started learning intellectually about film mainly through feminist film theory. How have these shifting feminisms shaped your work—in terms of questions of the gaze, to pick one canonical example? For instance, in your video The Amateurist, you comment on how systems of surveillance subject women to particular scrutiny. The surveillance taking place within the video, which is implicitly a kind of self-surveillance since you play both the watcher and the watched, is taken very, very seriously, even though no useful data is being gathered.

When I first started thinking about *The Amateurist*, I thought, “What would be the most delicious movie to watch?” And I thought that a woman watching another woman would be what I would most want to see. The fact that I’m playing both women was more of a logistical solution because I was making videos in my apartment with almost no money. Also, at that time I was living in a corner apartment on the second floor, and I spent a lot of time watching people out of the window. Sometimes I felt like the captain of the street up there in my little watchtower.

Now we are living in the Homeland Security era, when surveillance has become so much more integrated into everyday life. The context has shifted somewhat. . . . I guess now I’m wondering about the world’s grim state of affairs and its impact on your work.

Well, we don’t know how to live. We don’t know how to reconcile spirituality with technological progress and growth, and as a nation we don’t acknowledge that this is a problem or even a topic. We don’t have to because we have enough resources to obliterate any conversation. It certainly gives me a sense of urgency; I want to create room for the conversation. And I want to do this in ways that

prove that the reigning systems are not the only option. I have to do this again and again, at every turn, or else the story I am telling — the story about our desire to feel more — is not a true story, it's just a theory.

In Joanie 4 Jackie or Learning to Love You More, your art runs on a kind of gift economy. You are aggressive about pursuing collaborations with all kinds of people and opening your work up to them, and you make it clear that you need these collaborations — which is not the same, it seems, as the hero artist who swoops in to “help the community.” Instead, and I think this is true of so many of the moments of intimacy that you portray in your videos, you are looking for moments of genuine warmth — however fleeting — within the spaces of consumer capitalism. It’s a search for something tender in the most degraded or deadening spaces like office buildings, department stores, and tract houses.

In a sense, my work has always had to do with other people. It’s amorphous and ever-changing in the way that your ideas of yourself are always changing. I am almost thirty now, and the chip on my shoulder is mostly gone. It feels so good. I got to this place largely through performances, and movies and stories, since they help me change. My art is sort of like my car. It’s the way I get to the next place.

Notes

1. Quotes are from Zac Pennington, review of *The Swan Tool*, by Miranda July, On the Boards/Behnke Center for Contemporary Performance, Seattle, *Stranger*, 10 October 2002; and James Hannaham, “The Multimedia is the Message,” *Village Voice*, 12 December 2001, www.villagevoice.com/issues/1050/sightlines.php.
2. Among others, her story “It Was Romance” was printed in the *Harvard Review* 25 (2003): 84-86, “Birthmark” appeared in the *Paris Review* 165 (2003): 45-51, and “Jack and Al” was featured in the *Mississippi Review* 30.3 (2002): 51-52.
3. The film department at Bard College has been managing Joanie 4 Jackie since fall 2003.

Julia Bryan-Wilson, an early supporter of Joanie & Jackie, is now a graduate student in art history at the University of California, Berkeley. Her writing has appeared in *Art Journal*, the *Oxford Art Journal*, and *Technology and Culture*. She is finishing a dissertation about artistic labor in US minimalism and conceptualism.



The Swan Tool (2001). Courtesy Miranda July