Nick Mauss
Dispersed Events, 2018
A Percent-for-Art Commission
The Ralph Landau
Chemical Engineering Building
Building 66
Having spent my life moving among languages and places, I find myself constantly translating. I find myself revisiting encounters in the flourish of their disorder and tangents. —Nick Mauss

Persistent Presence / Presence Persists

Gloria Sutton

Comprised of seven discrete ceramic murals, the subject of *Dispersed Events*, Nick Mauss’s commission for MIT’s Building 66, has to do with the choice of materials affixed to the building’s interior pressed-concrete walls in equal measure with the interstitial spaces that these massive volumes create. Dispersed over five floors and two atria within I. M. Pei’s Landau Building, which houses the Department of Chemical Engineering, the steel-framed murals are accessed by a series of linked stairways and landings that move the viewer both horizontally and vertically through architectural space, as well as conceptually through aesthetic history.

Offering an efficient passageway through the southeast corner of MIT’s central campus, Pei’s distinct design—a 30-60-90 triangle—generates its own syncopated rhythms as people enter, often one by one, through the building’s most narrow point and form a steady stream as they travel together along the length of its longest corridor in discernable circadian cycles. This tight tessellation of bodies across a narrow plane makes the act of crossing into the generously spaced and brightly lit corner atrium that frames the murals feel doubly expansive. Yet, it is impossible to take in the scene of shared sociality that the artist has orchestrated all at once.

The sublimity of the project’s overall logic reveals itself through a series of long views, oblique glances, and subtle encounters that do not represent or picture but rather, in the terms of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, present, open up, and stage “the distance that separates us, but also . . . prevents us from being separated.” In this way, Mauss’s murals at MIT directly correspond with the artist’s work writ large in that they are not simply about the movement of bodies but, rather, movement itself as a historiographic condition—a set of narrative frameworks used to interpret both proximity and distance and the transitions that occur in between. The ways bodies come together (as multitudes, constellations), as objects (collections), as fields of knowledge (disciplines), and commensurately, the ways bodies move apart, separate, retreat, and withdraw via diverse pressures (including acts of erasure and disavowal) within the current moment and throughout history remain of equal and pressing import.
Mauss translated the patterned vocabulary of Majolica and exploited the unpredictability of its successive firing process—each tile goes into the kiln three times—in order to draw out unexpected chemical reactions that yielded effects more akin to watercolor and ink painting than traditional Majolica. For Building 66, the artist recast each individual terra-cotta tile to act like a sheet of paper that, in addition to capturing a high degree of information (the pressure of the hand, the viscosity of the glaze), underscores how drawing remains a temporal process—or, as he noted, “a kind of transmission that can hold traces, the inchoate, the emphatic and the detail.” Finding a way “to think about something that is not there, that is far away, or misunderstood,” his tiles are suggestive of what he has previously described as a type of “unfathomable co-presence . . . history as heterotopia.” Moreover, the images that Mauss drew or stenciled onto the tiles reflect the fact that they were made in different settings, separated by weeks, months, if not years. This temporal and locational distancing makes them less about tracing a singular source and more to do with acknowledging how the latent processes of memory can become enmeshed with distraction, afterimages, and interruptions. In this manner, the deployment of ceramic forms reads not as a reclamation of craft or the recovery of an outmoded style but as a durational response—a type of obscurantism towards the instantaneous that has also characterized the digital flow of public images. Importantly, they are a crucial reminder that the internet is merely one domain for the routine mashup of transitional matter.

The gestural markings that the murals put into circulation—hand-drawn lines, stenciled patterns like the orange/red chevrons that adorn the composition on level three, and the blue/green meshwork that appears on level two, as well as the circular block repeat pattern overlaid by an acid yellow wash that covers the eight-foot expanse of the composition on level five—collectively form a subjective graphic language. While these geometric designs may suggest the repeatable pixel patterns commonly used to create the gradient backgrounds of webpages, it is important to note that they, in fact, abstrain from camera vision (lens, scanner), and their relatively slow, protracted, and accretive development over time runs counter to the emphasis on immediacy often associated with digital processes that have come to predominate the discourse on contemporary art.

The murals come into being through a dual compositional system that relies both on chance operations and an algorithmic precision akin to digital compositing in order to make an image by fitting smaller ones together. This approach offers a compelling model that displaces the binary terms of “sameness” and “difference” that prevail as the dominant modes for theorizing sociality and relationality (including much of queer theory and cultural and visual studies). Composited digital images are produced by making the edges, cracks, and fissures—the boundaries delimiting structures and identities—less visible, or noticeable, through the act of digital erasure and blurring. To this end, composited images model ways to consider the aesthetics of what scholar John Paul Rico has articulated as “being-together as a scene of shared-separation” in which “co-existence lies in the act of spacing and decision,” placing ethical weight on the points of information that become subject to concealment, distortion, camouflage, and misregistration. Within the act of compositing an image, meaning literally and figuratively hinges on the margins and hovers around its edges, offering a type of nuanced position between radical incommensurability and the unchecked preference for universal compatibility that has arisen in proportion with network culture. This allows for a productive
Nick Mauss (b. 1980, New York) lives and works in New York. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally in solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2018), the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto, Portugal (2017); and Bergen Kunsthall, Bergen, Norway (2013), among others. His work is in the collections of museums around the world, including the Long Museum, Shanghai, China; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the M+ Museum, Hong Kong, and many others.

Gloria Sutton is Associate Professor of Contemporary Art History at Northeastern University and a Research Affiliate in the Art, Culture, and Technology program at MIT. She is the author of The Experience Machine: Stan VanDerBeek’s Movie-Drome and Expanded Cinema (2015) published by MIT Press.

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Nick Mauss was selected for the commission by Percent-for-Art committee members, including Richard Amster, Director, MIT Campus Construction; Martin Z. Bazant, E. G. Roos (1944) Professor of Chemical Engineering, Dep't. Executive Officer, Chemical Engineering, Professor of Mathematics; Keith Diggans, Associate Program Manager, MIT Facilities; Paul C. Ha, Director, MIT List Visual Arts Center; and Klavs Jenson, Warren K. Lewis Professor of Chemical Engineering and Professor of Materials Science and Engineering.

About Public Art at MIT: MIT maintains one of the most active Percent-for-Art programs in the country. The program allocates funds to commission or purchase art for each new major renovation or building project on campus. Formally instituted in 1968, the Percent-for-Art program continues to expand MIT’s public art collection through new commissions by important and critically acclaimed contemporary artists, including Olafur Eliasson, Cai Guo-Qiang, Anish Kapoor, Sol LeWitt, Matthew Ritchie, Sarah Sze, and Leo Villareal, among others. The Percent-for-Art program is administered by the List Visual Arts Center, the contemporary art museum at MIT, which also presents exhibitions and public programming in the Wiesner Building (E15) at 20 Ames Street in Kendall Square.