

# Public Works

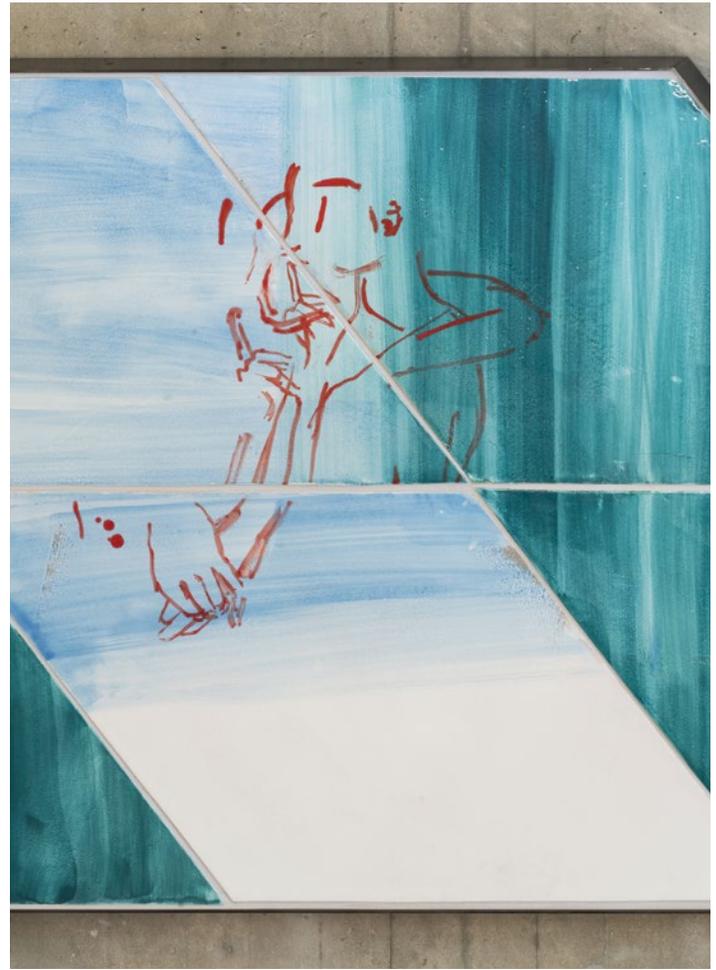


**Nick Mauss**  
***Dispersed Events, 2018***

A Percent-for-Art Commission

The Ralph Landau  
Chemical Engineering Building  
Building 66





# Persistent Presence / Presence Persists

*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<sup>1</sup>

## 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."<sup>2</sup> 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.

Deriving precise economy in its ambulatory staging, each rectilinear composition seems to hover in its own designated visual recess, allowing the disjointed figurative forms and abstracted textures that appear in each mural's grid of Majolica tiles to unfold at distinct intervals. Composed of tin-glazed terra cotta, Majolica ceramics are distinguished by a sharp white background that contrasts against the vivid pigments painted on such wares as pitchers, plates, and decorative tiles, often done in ornate motifs with recognizable themes indicative of their domestic uses. The chemical mixture of Majolica glazes is remarkable for its dual capacity for finesse and durability. The faintest of details can be executed in brilliant hues that do not fade for centuries, keeping Majolica production in regular demand in Italy since at least the 1500s.

Mauss's own ceramic vernacular supplements his well-established fluency in drawing and was gained over a series of visits to a historic Majolica atelier located in Faenza, southeast of Bologna, where he tested the glazes, developed new techniques, and executed the tile designs and drawings. Founded in 1928, Bottega Gatti is renowned for its collaborations with visual artists, including Italian Futurists who agitated against the principles of Western art history in the early twentieth century—a response to the civic surreal of their own modern epoch marked by self-destructive tendencies of global scale, the suppression of civil rights, and a blind faith in technological positivism.

The finished tiles, which measure from ten to twelve inches square, were then shipped to Mauss's New York studio where he shuffled and arranged them similar to an architecturally scaled sliding block puzzle in which one piece must be moved to accommodate the movement of another. Set in gray grout and held together by a custom-built support system, the seven distinct compositions of gridded tiles range in size from six by three feet to eight by twelve feet and are installed on levels one through five on permanent public view. The use of Majolica ceramics itself may seem like an anachronistic choice, yet it remains one of the most enduring and resilient methods for public works. And provocatively, this chemical process invented during the Italian Renaissance echoes many of the paradoxical conditions that drive the adaption of digital culture within contemporary art. Here, as elsewhere, Mauss's works offer a reevaluation or recalibration of aesthetic conventions (and their institutional framing devices) associated with visual art, dance, ballet, theater, design, commercial display, and fashion by drawing out their adaptive qualities. In doing so, he contends with the uneven visibility given to issues of lived experience that not only shape and condition but also regulate real bodies in real time and real space.

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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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, abstain 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). Compositing 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 Ricco has articulated as “being-together as a scene of shared-separation” in which “co-existence lies in the act of spacing and decision,”<sup>5</sup> 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



*Dispersed Events* (detail), 2018

comparison, for example, between analog and digital forms that does not retreat into established binaries of maker and receiver or subject and object. Doing so arguably reorients the very markers by which we define collective and singular identity. In this manner, Mauss's murals eschew the desultory conversation on the immersive that is routinely recirculated about architecturally scaled images within the field of contemporary art.

Above all, the murals at MIT assert and insist on a specific scale—the physically palpable sense of ratio or commensurability with the viewer's own body—and thus reflexively highlight the way that scale has been eroded by browser-based interfaces that erase the specificity of an image's contextual frame. In contrast, Mauss's murals directly correspond with the contours and details of their surrounding built environment. The parallelogram shape of the mural on level one, for example, follows the moves and pacing of another pair of equally balanced lines, that is, the staggered cement staircase and its metal railing above which the mural is mounted. The visual harmony of this architectural pas de deux belies the engineering feat required to hoist and append the structural casework that holds the mural's substantial weight in place above and around the bodies that busily traverse the steps below. While the tiles' swaths of blue and green washes draw the eye upward, the main event actually takes place within the wider structure of the stairwell where Mauss rehabilitated Pei's original built-in concrete planter boxes that run perpendicular to the staircase. The hearty vines of the newly installed Pothos plants will, over time, cascade down the balconies adding a green backdrop between the airspace of the two atria in Building 66, putting the action that transpires on the stairs into starker relief. As in his

**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,

**About Public Art at MIT:** MIT maintains one of the most active Percent-for-Art programs in the country. The program allots 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.

   #MITListArts

**MIT List Visual Arts Center**  
20 Ames Street, Building E15  
Cambridge, MA 02139

[listart.mit.edu](http://listart.mit.edu)

earlier projects, which interpolate a range of artistic disciplines and their exhibitionary praxis, Mauss's murals accentuate the presence of people looking, reading, listening, being, and apprehending, while often becoming figures within the works themselves.

*Dispersed Events* follows the artist's consistent ability to locate generative tensions between the methods of the historical avant-garde and current practices of looking and sensing, not simply by recovering or restaging but by rethinking the conventional compartments that traditionally divided the visual from the performing arts and, more critically, by asking why they continue to persist. Mauss's murals do not mimic the language of dance or transpose the syntax of theater to generate a new pictorial paradigm. Rather, they relay the logic of those bodies of knowledge, how they convey internalized behaviors—the ways people act, move, gesture, how they avoid confrontation or solicit it—ultimately drawing attention to how people create a public.

#### NOTES

- 1 Nick Mauss, "Whenever the Nervous System is Described," in *Come and Interrupt Me* (Minneapolis: Midway Contemporary Art, 2012), 39.
- 2 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 90. Quoted in John Paul Ricco, *The Decision Between Us: Art and Ethics in the Time of Scenes* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014), 3.
- 3 Nick Mauss, quoted in Catherine Wood, "Point of Undoing," *Mousse 60* (October–November 2017): 87.
- 4 Nick Mauss, quoted in *Nick Mauss: Intricate Others* (Milan: Mousse Publishing, with Villa Serralves, Porto, Portugal, 2017), 15.
- 5 Ricco, *The Decision Between Us*, 2.

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.

The public art collection is free and open to all. Visit [listart.oncell.com](http://listart.oncell.com) for a self-guided tour of the collection. Guided tours are also offered regularly. For more information visit us online at [listart.mit.edu](http://listart.mit.edu).

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, Dept. Executive Officer, Chemical Engineering, Professor of Mathematics; Keith Diggins, 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.

ALL IMAGES:  
Nick Mauss, *Dispersed Events*, 2018.  
Tin-glazed, hand-painted ceramic murals.  
An MIT Percent-for-Art Commission for the Ralph Landau Chemical Engineering Building.  
Photos: Peter Harris Studio.