

Gregory Minissale ponders Michael Stevenson's exhibition *Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop: seating proposals for a Grantmaker* presented at Michael Lett 3 East St from 23 June – 5 August 2023.

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Tāmaki Makaurau  
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GREGORY MINISSALE

Michael Stevenson's *Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop: seating proposals for a Grantmaker* (2023), inspires thoughts about minimalism, postminimalism and critical theories concerning how knowledge and power situate and circumscribe the body, the subject, the worker, and the worshipper. When I first set eyes on the installation, I was struck by how reduced and simple it seemed. There appeared to be five cubes laid out in grid form. I thought immediately of Robert Morris's *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)* from 1965, roughly the same size as Stevenson's: a metre cubed. But then I observed that the cubes were somewhat deflated, and I thought of Claes Oldenburg's *Floor Burger* (1962). Of course, these were more touchy-feely than Morris's hard-edged and uninviting mirror boxes. They were, in fact, bean bags, the kind that trendy corporate types would sit in for a brainstorming exercise to discuss a marketing strategy, a new technological fix, or a grant proposal, using the bean bags to produce a kind of casual lethargy and camaraderie that relaxes the body even while strategizing. These thoughts transformed the installation space from a gallery into a ubiquitous digital corporation, even here in the old converted church. The old converted church! Suddenly I imagined a group of believers gathered in a workshop where people would relax, sink into the bean bags, and chat about the Kingdom of God, church growth, and the gifts of the spirit. The church hall is actually an old Revival Hall situated in Auckland's East Street recently converted into a Michael Lett gallery space. The Hall was a site for baptism, for the receiving of the Holy Spirit, for empowerment, and for entering a new timeline in Christ.<sup>1</sup>

### Softly-softly sculptures

A stroke of inspiration, really, to invite the body to sink into the soft furnishings, the artwork, as a kind of magical, childlike ritual performance where one trusts the chair by falling back on the heels of the

feet, vaguely rechanneling a Baptist ceremony of 'immersion' in a river. And without eyes in the back of one's head, one does, in microseconds, fall back yet also forward into the future. Seated so low, with feet in the air above the heart like floating in the river, one could even knock one's shoes together, as in the ruby slippers of the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, whispering, "There's no place like home, there's no place like home." But such comfort, sliding back into dreams of play and fantasy, quickly becomes troubled and uncanny. Each bean bag is embossed with text. The docile body must stand upright (the archetypal Freudian signifier of human consciousness) to look down to read the texts. One even has to smooth out the surface of the bean bag, as if making a bed, another way in which the artwork forces the body to behave in specific ways or to fit into and play a role in ascertaining situation types: the gallery, playtime, the church, the corporate office, ordeals of *The Wizard of Oz*, a place to snooze.

One can move the furniture to see the text and possibly turn the bean bags over to see underneath. Allan Kaprow's 1963 installation, *Push and Pull. A Furniture comedy for Hans Hoffman* was a room with furniture casually laid out. The work had an instruction notice advising the gallery visitor that "Everyone else can come in and, if the room(s) are furnished, they also can arrange them, accommodating themselves as they see fit. Each day things will change."<sup>2</sup> The idea was to undermine the paradigm of the artist as controller and originator of the composition (referencing the artist's teacher Hans Hoffman who taught his students to push and pull composition in painting). Instead, the viewer was the agent of change and could feel at home rearranging things to their aesthetic taste: an invitation to move around in, perform and engage with the artwork. Nevertheless, this is a somewhat dubious creativity and freedom prescribed and dumbed-down as it is. "Rearranging the furniture" suggests futility and pointlessness, reflecting the limits of our domestic freedom of manoeuvre inhabited by consumer durables and bric-

1 — The artist draws an analogy between reoccurring cycles of revival and their desire for a return to the principles of the first-century church with 'day01,' in tech speak.

2 — See *Aspen* no. 6A, item 5: <https://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen6A/pushAndPull.html>



Michael Stevenson  
*Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop:*  
*seating proposals for a Grantmaker*  
 2023



Michael Stevenson  
*The Apply Chair: Apply for Funding*  
 2023  
 (laser-engraved polyester tufted pile fabric, shredded  
 documents, chipped foam, breathable non-woven  
 polypropylene, metal rings, 1000 × 1000 × 1000mm)

a-brac. It is interesting that psychologists recommend you rearrange the furniture in your workspace because it increases your dopamine levels while reducing the stress activation of cortisol. With Stevenson's 'soft sculptures,' visitors can vary their paths through the arrangement (it is notable that the French '*sens*' signifies both 'direction' and 'meaning'). The soft cubes suggest a roll of a dice to uncover each facet, although it is you who walk around it with stooping postures and genuflections.

There is something mysterious and symbolic about having the text touch the body: to actually feel that one is physically in the text. There are vague memories of Franz Kafka's 1919 short story *In the Penal Colony*, where a torture machine carves the sentence, the law, into the prisoner's skin until he dies slowly.<sup>3</sup> Grim. But the body can be seen as something that absorbs and interiorises the word, authority, and the law; writing on the body is just a literal translation of this fact—the word as flesh. Morris's mirrored boxes reflect the viewer's body and where it is situated in the gallery—forcing them to reflect on their own facticity, place, body, and being. But here, the power of words, mantras, and corporate spiel are continuous with the skin. A soft kind of Taylorism darkens the mind.<sup>4</sup> But what are these mysterious texts and their esoteric import?

### The texts

A key chair, entitled *About* introduces "Who We Are," the board of the Future Fund, among them SBF, "who set out to make as much money as he could in order to give away everything he earned to charity. He initially worked as a trader, then founded FTX, a cryptocurrency exchange. Now he wants to use the wealth he's generated to empower people and projects that are doing the most to make positive, long-lasting change." Other members are a mixture of individuals with philosophy, finance, or engineering backgrounds, particularly those with cyber currency experience. This frames the installation as 'players' in a complex board game. One is torn between having sympathy for these good intentions and the suspicion that they act as a respectable veneer for the machinations of crypto-currency, as we see with various forms of green or pink washing. Another cube features 'FAQs' that advise applicants to the fund what to focus on:

*Please make your application as sincere as possible, and think about how it relates*

*to our Principles and Areas of Interest. Sometimes people seeking funding make up highly tenuous stories about how their work is related to funder objectives. That just wastes everyone's time. Please tell us what you really think, not what you think we want to hear.*

The *Approach* chair texts are upbeat and encouraging, if somewhat jargony, with hidden assumptions about the value of private companies and incentives wrapped in an altruistic envelope:

*We're open to private sector norms. We welcome applications from for-profits, non-profits, and hybrid organizations; we appreciate that structuring as a for-profit can help increase recruitment and improve sustainability. ... we're supportive of paying private sector salaries when that will provide the best incentives. What we care about is how much good you can do with the funding we provide.*

Meanwhile, the fourth cube, *Principles*, veers off into speculation about the future:

*...our species is becoming powerful enough to destroy itself, or to veer permanently off course. Nuclear weapons have already given us unprecedented destructive power. Advanced biological weapons or misaligned AI systems could kill billions, or wipe out our species altogether. And even if we survive, new forms of surveillance, weaponry, and social control could crush human freedom and flourishing.*

The 'we' address becomes somewhat fatiguing in the final cube, although it appears well-intentioned. The text for 'Project Ideas' delves into current concerns about AI and even biological warfare:

*Could AIs have consciousness, and does that make them deserving of legal protection? What should law and global governance do about autonomous weapons? We think analytic philosophers, economists, and people from the effective altruism community could make strong contributions in this area, and we expect that building up capacity, expertise, and reputation in AI ethics could become important in the long run.*

### Threshold

Where the altar used to be in the old hall, there is a partition in which the artist asked for a doorway to be built. It seems to function as a kind of iconostasis that acts as both a cover and a partition. It

3 – Stevenson points out that the text is laser-engraved into the fabric, "giving it a milled, shaved, look."

4 – According to the artist, 'waiting for the other shoe to drop' is a phrase that was used frequently during the crypto crisis of 2022, the anticipation of further significant events occurring on the heels of an initial market correction, and has its origins in the early twentieth century: "Workers in large dense urban cities whose lives were very much determined by productivity and efficiency lived in crowded tenement housing. Walls and floors were thin - when a neighbour arrived home after their shift, you'd clearly hear them remove their shoes. The disturbance of one shoe hitting the floor brought with it the expectation of the second."





Michael Stevenson  
*The Shallow Pond*  
 2023  
 (scratched, polychromed wood, steel, brass,  
 glass, ceramic, recycled plastic,  
 2320 x 1260 x 1010mm)

screens off the sacred and ecclesiastical inner sanctum, the unseen black box of esoteric thought, from the public, exoteric, revealed space where the bean bags sit. The doorway or threshold is marked by four signifiers that announce their presence only as keys into the heterotopic space within. First, there is an empty umbrella stand in the form of a ceramic sheep with holes in it, a kind of Duchampian touch that signifies absent bodies and shelter from the shower of words on the bean bags behind us in the public space. The threshold is made of compressed trash, recycled into board, which forms the porch. One is stepping on a history of many other fragments of past lives and contexts in the analogue world, now compressed into what appear to be pixels or corrupted data streams and scrambled passwords—accessing the information behind the door. Next, there is peculiar door knocker, the only representation of human figure in the work.<sup>5</sup> Last, there is a mosquito net bundled in a black cover tied to the door handle that prevents the door from closing or slamming. Again, it seems to signify a hinge between different worlds translatable as a net filtering out impurities, blood-carrying insects, from the rarefied sterile interior. It seems as if we are leaving our bodies behind on this raised platform or altar upon which there is one final cube: an empty throne for an absent wizard behind the curtain.

The last cube behind the door has tiny ‘care labels’ stitched into the seams, which suggest various outcomes: “Revise and Submit,” “Were Missing Some Info,” or “We’ve Placed You in our Customized Track...Our Process for Grants That Touch Whole Communities.” The final aspect is the legal “Fine Print”: legal get-out clauses or fine print about protecting the grantmakers from future litigation: “Entrants agree that FTX philanthropy and its affiliates shall not be liable to entrants for any type of damages that arise out of or are related to the contest.” Then follows a worrying devil in the detail text that gives the grantmaker very broad powers to exploit the winning entry:

*Winners grant to the Grantmaker the right to use their name and likeness for any purpose arising out of or related to the contest. Winners also grant to grantmaker a non-exclusive royalty-free license to reprint, publish s/or use the entry for any purpose arising out of related to the contest, including linking to or re-publishing the work.*

One wonders whether the texts are themselves generated by AI. They have

a kind of soulless, bureaucratic address a computer would adopt in a monotone manner over the loudspeaker system of a spaceship. A pernicious voice that one can easily internalise as an autosuggestion. We have seen the deadpan manner in which Simon Denny uses mantras, soundbites, and memes from capitalist, digital corporations, and institutional and bureaucratic systems to create a contemporary version of sixties Systems Art. What Stevenson has done, however, is to invite an analogue experience that one has moving around objects while discovering things or making paths through things, encouraging a series of mental rotations of situational types: a church becomes a gallery then, turns back into a church or a digital corporate workplace, a clap-happy millenarian workshop, or inner sanctum—or the whole thing is a mysterious simulation. Remarkably, *Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop: seating proposals for a Grantmaker* conducts a spatial, site-specific phenomenology (a kinaesthetic, tactile, rhythmic, and temporal duration), immersing the viewer as a docile body in a network, neural net, or net of meanings. The Proto-Indo-European root of ‘net’ means to ‘to bind or to tie,’ where we become tied up and entangled. There is something that does reel us in literally as bodies while inspiring curiosity—and this is how the best kind of installations work. The achievement here, however, lies precisely in how immersive it is while at the same time being a cautionary tale about the dangers of immersion.

Professor Gregory Minissale is a transdisciplinary researcher specialising in psychological and aesthetic approaches to vision in artistic practices and visual cultures, critical theory, and cross-cultural phenomenologies. Based at Waipapa Taumata Rau The University of Auckland, he is the author of *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

5 — The whole ensemble, door, sidelight, and porch Stevenson has titled *The Shallow Pond*, after a thought experiment by Peter Singer, a common origin point for both the Effective Altruism movement and the Future Fund. The artist adds that the brass figure “is immersed in a form of superior moral contemplation while the other figure — a drowning child carved into the polychromed paint surface of the door — is immersed in water and in immediate danger.”



Michael Stevenson  
*The Grantmaker's Chair*  
2023  
(breathable non-woven polypropylene,  
shredded documents, chipped foam, metal  
rings, printed polyester taffeta tape,  
1000 x 1000 x 1000mm)

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