

by Linda Earle

For years an image from César Aira’s improbable, brilliant novel *Ghosts* has lodged itself insistently in my mind—an image with which I’d been fascinated, but that I’d not entirely understood until it emerged more fully for me in Chloë Bass’s work. Aira’s novel takes place during a single day and documents a construction worker’s family living surreptitiously on the site of a future skyscraper. The family’s lives are organized by routine, daily labor, and the habits of survival, but the temporal and spatial planes of their existence are disrupted by a band of revenants who have also come to occupy the half-built space. The daughter of the family can see them, and as they beckon her to join their legion she has a vision of the building in the present—under construction—in conjunction with another image that Aira describes as “a reciprocal mirroring of what has already been built and what will be built eventually. The all-important bridge between the two reflections was provided by a third term: the unbuilt.”¹

Chloë Bass’s conceptual project occupies this unbuilt space, generating what she has called “souvenirs for feelings you haven’t had yet.”² The substance and strategies of *Wayfinding* prompt recognition and memory in the moment, as well as responses whose meaning and implications for how you live in the future will truly unfold over the as yet unknown territory of your experience.

Wayfinding is a part of a practice built across performance, publication, social practice, sculpture, and architecture. The works have different trajectories within Bass’s conceptual terrain, but all are informed by the extraordinary quality of her attention to the ways in which shifts of emotion and consciousness, rooted in the everyday, have consequence and resonance in the public/

social sphere. This intention is never on the surface of the projects; the viewer is instead beckoned to pursue meaning and significance as a personal project.

In *The Bureau of Self-Recognition* (2011–13), Bass performs the familiar ritual transactions and protocols of banking that may naturally instigate questions about our political economy and how it is institutionalized in terms of power and control, but which relate more fundamentally to implications of the deeply personal formation of self-worth, self-regard, and trust. She transforms this interaction by offering, in effect, genuine forms of customer service and what is literally personal currency (your face on the dollars). *The Book of Everyday Instruction* (2015–18) was anchored in one-on-one research, probing behaviors of aloneness and togetherness. Bass undermines the subject/object paradigm of research through conversation and with the compassion and empathy inherent in attention to the ordinary moments that ultimately shape our lives.

With *Wayfinding* Bass has found a particularly elegant and unified strategy in the way she adapts and subverts the instructional and locational expectations of standard wayfinding systems. The language of the central signs is interrogative—tricks of light play on the reflective surfaces, which can appear to be transparent or refractive depending on the ambient light, where you're standing, or if glimpsed from the corner of your eye. Legibility is fleeting and evanescent. The emergent emotions, memories, and associations that these signs evoke can also be fugitive and gently unsettling.

Although this installation is on the grounds of an art museum, in the context of *Wayfinding* I think of Bass as a writer above all else. Attempts to describe the interplay of the text and material elements of the work evoke literary analogs. I think of the clear surface of a well-wrought essay

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that allows you to see more deeply into the currents that run underneath it; there is a narrative you can construct from a dialogue between the four central questions on the reflective billboards and the confessional asides and observations planted in the ground in the manner of didactics in a botanical garden. One of them—“Every time I’ve nearly been killed . . .”—is in itself a short story with a long tail, so to speak. Bass’s work combines the economy and heft of recognition offered by poetry, and *Wayfinding* in particular invites this kind of rumination. Because it resides both outside the walls of the museum and outside of interpretive directives, you may navigate it with a different kind of attention, carrying just below your conscious engagement with the text the residue of dreams, to-do lists, lost keys . . .

So far, I have been thinking of the experience of the installation as a reader, a solitary walker. In fact, it is likely that the piece starts significant conversations and affects the emotional dynamic among pairs and groups. But, as with any shared experience, there are individual “souvenirs” as well.

Bass’s uniquely faceted body of work resists neat art historical mapping. Her practice embodies multiple artistic and philosophical currents, but I am struck by her interest in Adrian Piper’s work, particularly *My Calling Card #1* and *#2* (1986–90). Although *Wayfinding* and Piper’s calling cards have distinctly different intentions, they share a framework of attention to the commonplace and the ways in which social mechanisms reside in individual behaviors. Piper’s intention with the calling cards was specifically directed toward the ubiquity and pervasiveness of racism. In text and performance—at once decorous and confrontational—she constructs the terms of her visibility one by one as she passes cards to people who “made/laughed at/agreed to [a] racist remark. . . . I regret any

discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.”³

Bass’s work is rarely that frontal, but it does have political resonance. Her pedagogical model offers ways of aligning awareness and empathy to figure things out for oneself, encounter by encounter. I find this akin to expressions of protest after Breonna Taylor’s murder that were anchored in saying her name, saying who she was as a daughter and a friend, what she wore, what she loved, what she dreamed, and asking us to think of who we are if we tolerate her abduction from that everyday substance of her life. Where the appreciation of that fundamental commonality doesn’t exist, there is no justice. As the viewer metabolizes *Wayfinding*, the need for both reflection and connection emerges.

Inevitably the news and current events of the time will attach themselves to the awakening experience of *Wayfinding* as it travels from a park in Harlem to St. Louis through lockdown, calamity, and relief. But wherever it is, the souvenirs it imparts will include the piece’s interaction with its surroundings. A landscape carries its own narratives and implies social arrangements as the contours of the natural are accommodated or erased—the strictness of its paths, its signage and wayfinding devices, the presence or absence of others. Somewhere down the road, your memory will perhaps orchestrate all of this with the reverberant questions of *Wayfinding* that have unfolded from where you are now into an unbuilt space and its as-yet-unshaped, unnamed possibility.

Notes

1. César Aira, *Ghosts*, trans. Chris Andrews (New York: New Directions, 2009), 57.
2. Chloë Bass, “Wayfinding: A Conversation with Chloë Bass,” interview by Helen Hy Kim, *Aster(ix)*, June 11, 2020, <https://asterixjournal.com/wayfinding-chloe-bass/>.
3. Adrian Piper, *My Calling Card #1 and #2* (1986–90). Mixed media.