MARTHA FRIEDMAN AND HEATHER ROWE

Spring 2008–Fall 2009
Excerpts from pre-interview texts and e-mails

MARTHA: [text] Read the *New Yorker* article this week on itching . . . somehow it makes me think of your work! Seriously, the article has a part about mirror boxes, phantom limbs, and reflection/perception stuff—totally up your alley in a round about way, I think.

HEATHER: [text] I have just finished the *New Yorker* article about the itch—that was amazing. First I have to tell you about this other *New Yorker* article I just read, which is equally interesting. It is about people who can't stop the urge to hurt themselves.

It brings up the fact that we all get urges or impulses to do things that we know are bad for ourselves; something banal like biting your nails or things that we just imagine, like driving into the opposite lane or jumping off a cliff. Most times, of course, we don't follow through. Edgar Allan Poe called it "the imp of the perverse." I thought of that great scene in *Annie Hall* where Christopher Walken is telling Woody Allen about his fantasy of driving into oncoming headlights and hearing shattering glass. And then he ends up driving Woody Allen and Annie Hall to the airport. Great scene.

I do think about when everything familiar suddenly changes, imagined or not. Shifts that occur where nothing can be the same ever again.

The itch article deals more with perception and how our brains and bodies communicate. I love the example of the dog running behind a picket fence. Of course, we know the dog is not sliced up, but the actual visual information our brain is receiving says otherwise. The amazing thing about the mirror treatments that scientists are using is that by creating a reflection of the real limb, the brain will be triggered to read the illusion as real, and therefore help people who experience pain and discomfort in phantom limbs. It really makes you think about perception and what is really real and how the brain uses memory to figure out the whole story.

I try to be very aware of how the viewers' body interacts with the structures I build—in my process it very much determines how I am arranging the materials within the piece. How mirrors cut off part of the body and then have them reappear as the viewer moves through the space—perceptual trickery, but at some basic level.

MARTHA: I just visited the Louise Bourgeois show at the Guggenheim. People often make a connection with her to my sculptures. But I was thinking that there is a very strong relationship both physically and psychologically to your installations. It's almost as if you make the architectural enclosures and I make the cast objects inside. (I am referring to Bourgeois's later installations.) Does it seem embarrassing to be closely associated with her?

HEATHER: I haven't seen the exhibit yet but there is a Bourgeois installation in MoMA's "Multiplex" show that relates to what you are saying about both of our work. There is a folded, semi-enclosed structure which, once inside, you see sack-like, bulbous objects hanging from the wall. I love the architectural quality of the piece as well as the more vulnerable, organic elements hidden within.

HEATHER: [e-mail]
dear martha,
i wanted to write that i keep thinking about the waffle grid dissolving in the stomach. i love it. i had an idea of why you chose the waffle before but talking about it really got me seeing it in a more visceral way. Also, it made me recall when you were mentioning G. Stein's idea about the creative process and constipation (or expulsion) . . . I think it was this? I know this is a loaded subject but I just started connecting this idea to your objects—like the process of shitting becomes manifest in your works—in a really elegant way of course. I was just thinking about it and curious to know more.

MARTHA: [e-mail]
Hey—thanks for this e-mail. I would love to talk about the G. Stein passage—Oscar Wilde also has a good one linking creative production to crapping.

In-person interview takes place on a sunny day by the Hudson River, therefore the wind caused some of the tape to be inaudible.

HEATHER: . . . the Gertrude Stein thing . . .

MARTHA: Oh right, the Gertrude Stein (inaudible)

HEATHER: (inaudible)

MARTHA: No, I'm glad you (inaudible)

HEATHER: And then if you could just (inaudible)

MARTHA: I want to ask you more in depth about—I think we can actually start with this idea of interference, or causing static and a kind of slicing up the experience of your work.

HEATHER: Right.

MARTHA: About having a series of jarring moments when viewing your work and where that might come from. And about the actual process of construction and deconstruction while your work is in process. And I also want to ask you a couple of more questions about the nature of inspiration. Is there something you want me to ask you about your work? Something that you'd like to get in.

HEATHER: Well, we could talk about impermanence in terms of Gordon Matta-Clark. It's kind of sad that you can never experience most of his work. In the Whitney show there was a video and Richard Serra was talking about walking through the split house, of course that was an experience, he didn't want it to carry on as an art object. At one point in my work, I wasn't interested in making objects and I kind of didn't care enough about them and then I started to really care and pay more attention to the details. This is whether or not the work will last after an exhibition. And I think that's when my work became—I was able to communicate something with the work.

MARTHA: I feel like what you're saying is, you were always interested in the larger experience of the work and sort of orchestrating an experience for the viewer, an architectural experience that takes place in time as you move through it, but then you began to focus more on the sculptural details of that experience, so that then within the space between those two modes there becomes an inherent tension in terms of the construction, there is then left a question about how long is this thing really supposed to last. I think that's an interesting part of your work because it does sort of sit between a kind of quickly constructed gestural thing that might just function as a prop but then there are these inverted ornaments that seem to give it a different feeling of . . . no this is an object that will live on, on its own. Which is more about your relationship to the object and not—let me try and rephrase this again—there is, when I look at an installation, I usually feel like the artist is prioritizing the audience's experience. When I look at a classically autonomous sculpture sitting freely and fully in space, I feel like the priority of experience has been devoted to the relationship between the sculptor and the object. And what you're doing, it seems, is you sort of flip-flopped, and now you're somewhere in between.

HEATHER: Right.

MARTHA: Where the priority is neither given to your relationship with the object *or* the viewer; they're both equally important.

HEATHER: Yes.

MARTHA: Which is, I think, really interesting.

HEATHER: It also brings up a point of your work, because it is very object-oriented and the materials are very, very particular—well, there's certain types of finishes that you make for each object, but I feel like that is your way of maybe communicating with the viewer rather than . . . and then it does go back to you as a sculptor, like how is this made?

MARTHA: I'm very interested in the physical experience of the work. I indulge in my experience of making the work. I indulge heavily in the pleasure of the process of making it. So I've always thought that I really do tend to give the priority to that. It is also really important that viewers have their own physical experience with the work, whether it be strange or gross or "how did you do that?" kind of thing, or . . .

HEATHER: Right—the tension between it being really gross, but then you present it in a very elegant way.

MARTHA: Pardon?

MARTHA: No, I don't know if it's a problem as much as wanting it both ways. You know, there's a taste thing . . . I just think it comes from growing up and looking . . . just being physically interested as a child in a giant Calder or a small Jasper Johns. There's a certain kind of elegant physical dynamic that I just can't—like I can't kill my parents in that way, like I just really like it. But at the same time, I really like to be making a kind of handmade, bodily thing. That's a struggle for me, actually, you know? I want the elegant, engineered, possibly scientific quality of a Calder mobile but I also want the Paul

McCarthy melting, broken crap thing, too, and there is also an Eva Hesse sort of . . .

HEATHER: I was thinking about your work in terms of balance—maybe like how our internal organs work and how it seems like a really fragile system and things go wrong, obviously, but it's an elegant system, too, even though when you think about the inside of your body, or an organ outside of it, it's like, gross, but it is a really amazing too—everything works together in this really specific, intricate way. When my mother had her open-heart surgery—I don't know if I told you about this, and the surgery part is pretty scary—they put her on heart lung bypass, they cut her open, they cracked open her chest cavity and they started slicing into her heart.

HEATHER: Your heart isn't working, it's another . . . there's a machine . . .

MARTHA: There's a machine that's pumping the blood, oxygenating the blood and pumping it through your system, and that part's really scary and the heart surgery part is really scary, but *actually* the scariest part is after the surgery and they have to kind of turn your system back on. They have to get your various systems back in line. You have to get all the pressures right and all the fluids right and all the ways the foods are managed in your body right. And it's like unfucking believable how delicate a dance it is for the first forty-eight hours after surgery. And as your systems start to kind of get back to normal . . . your blood pressure and your heartbeat and all these things are being kind of pushed and pulled and then your digestive system has to get back on track. They're giving you fluids and (inaudible) coming out. It's like trying to get back to this elegant balance, but what's happening is so horrifying, like there's this green bile, you're barfing this green bile, you've got tubes coming out of your lungs, there's like this weird red squirty crap and you've got a catheter and you're trying to monitor your pee and you're all swollen. The idea that you're ever going to get to a place where you can just eat food and take a crap ten hours later seems like there's just no way you're going to get back there. So it is this unbelievably delicate, magical, difficult balance just surrounded with . . .

HEATHER: Bile and pus . . .

MARTHA: And pus and puke and blood and you know. I just can't quite wrap my head around that.

HEATHER: Or it can also be a system like my cat's—he was born with something totally screwed up in his—he had a hernia or something, which then, in effect, rearranged all his organs, and they're all the wrong size but they still function. They've all found a way to kind of work together and function. Who knows . . .

MARTHA: Right, your body can adjust to some . . .

HEATHER: Or it's just deformity, but yeah, what you're talking about is different, but it is interesting how a system that's wrong can become a working system in terms of organs.

MARTHA: Right, it seems like there is sort of a . . . your body has sort of a learning curve to it. In terms of the work that I make, there is also a kind referent to that classic modern sculpture, I am interested in making fun of, or being slightly self-deprecating about it in terms of my object matter coming from sort of silly, silly because they are normalized, found objects. Like waffles being a ridiculous, common, molded breakfast cake, as a way into both the grid as form and into the classical art making method of casting. The academic, possibly male notions, of the grid as a way of understanding the universe . . . though the grid is so funny when it is filtered through a waffle that lives in a domestic realm and is physically digested . . . . There's that built-in self-deprecation through it, because I'm also using it as a stand-in for the body, like you were talking about, but also poking fun at modern sculpture, for which I'm in awe of at the same time. I think there's something inherently female in that kind of making fun of myself as I'm working, like, who do you think you are? Without that element of self-deprecation, I think I would be completely uninterested.

HEATHER: Right . . . . So I was thinking about what you had been talking about, this Gertrude Stein thing.

MARTHA: The quote is from *The Making of Americans* and she's this sort of amazing . . . she's actually another interesting person to talk to in terms of the woman thing, too, in that she was this *really* self-assured woman who was sort of like, "no, no, no, I know what I'm doing and what I'm doing is fucking genius and get used to it because you'll know that in another fifty years. I know that now, everyone else will know that . . . " and she was this very charismatic woman, it sounds like, too, very self-assured that what she was doing was really modern. It was. So she has this strange prose tone but in a novel form. The book is almost watching herself write a book, which is also, I think, part of what it's like to be a woman artist, generally speaking; you're sort of watching yourself be

an artist. The book is about someone writing a book and talking about what it's like to invent characters and what it feels like to invent characters. It's very stop and start. And so this particular passage can be interpreted both as about what it feels like to invent characters as a writer, but it also can be interpreted as what it's like to take different types of shits, too. It goes something like . . . "sometimes it comes out of me repeatedly, sometimes it comes out of me gently, sometimes it comes out of me to do a duty for me, sometimes it comes out of me . . . " and so forth—and it's just this amazing description of both what it can be like to take different types of craps and what it's like when you're trying to invent something, bring something into the world and how that can go well or go badly or whatever. So I thought it would be great to take each clause and find a work, an artwork, and sort of apply it pretty directly and have a show. So in my work, I'm really aware of myself when I'm working and it's kind of about . . . it's getting back to the self-deprecating thing, where I'm kind of taking a bunch of maybe highly organized craps and it's about crapping, in terms of this is the body . . .

HEATHER: Like the glass waffle staying as it was.

MARTHA: Yeah, like a big shit.

HEATHER: Like ripping all the intestines out.

MARTHA: Right, it's like this hard, sharp, half-melted or melting grid that you're supposed to digest.

HEATHER: Yeah, definitely the process of making this piece for a show called "Slow Glass" felt constipated.

MARTHA: In what way is it constipated?

HEATHER: Well, at that moment I was having a really hard time because I knew I wanted to make something that was barely there or really subtle. I was fighting the whole time with the idea of even making anything at all because materials had become repulsive to me at the moment, all my standard materials like wood and glass. Then it finally came out in maybe a slow (inaudible).

MARTHA: A slow burn?

HEATHER: Yeah, and now I'm looking back at the piece and it's hanging, which was very different for me, and I'm not sure how I felt about that, but now I can look at the piece as a more enjoyable material object.

MARTHA: Well, it has an accordion structure to it. But that's funny because I want to ask you about what it *feels* like for you to make your work and I think that like it's another way of addressing the mirrors and the glass, you trying to find solid materials that don't exist or can disappear themselves, not only disappear parts of viewers or make it seem like they're missing parts of the structure, but to disappear themselves or decompose or invert themselves as they disappear. There's a fight in that that seems like something you experience in the studio.

HEATHER: Yeah, it's just like sort of wanting to say, here I am, but then just hide under the floor or something, or under a rug. It's always that tension between that feeling and the ubiquitous materials I use . . .

MARTHA: Which I think that maybe the ornamentation of the (inaudible) is maligned or imitation comes in at that point, maybe, like trying to further disappear the ubiquity of the materials, but at the same time, you also pick ubiquitous strategies for doing that, like wallpaper.

HEATHER: Right, right.

MARTHA: or rugs . . .

HEATHER: Right, well, that piece again, the "Slow Glass" piece, which is called *The Space Above the Ceiling*, I think because I also use that really crusty ceiling panel, like acoustic ceiling panel stuff.

MARTHA: That white crap?

HEATHER: It's like popcorn ceiling.

MARTHA: Right, right, right.

HEATHER: My friend Anna just saw a photo of it and said she thought of insomnia, which I thought was kind of right-on, getting that out of the image, but I also was thinking of empty square panels of air or something.

MARTHA: That you don't have access to seeing.

HEATHER: Yeah, that are just kind of in (inaudible).

MARTHA: There's a lot there in terms of the hidden spaces that we're always surrounded by, like elevator shafts and weird air shafts and things that we need . . .

HEATHER: Like pressing down on your head in New York.

MARTHA: Sounds so horrifying, they're oppressingly closing in on us. I think lifting the sculpture off the floor is another really interesting way to try and both flip the—reorient the viewer and also disappear the sculpture.

HEATHER: Right.

MARTHA: I was going to ask a woman question, but maybe I'll just skip it.

HEATHER: Ask it, because we can just edit it out.

MARTHA: Would it be fair to say that maybe one of the things we have in common is that we're both only trying to either make fun of or disappear ourselves?

HEATHER: Yeah.

HEATHER: But there's one other thing I just thought of, because your elastic band pieces, which I'm *so* excited to see where they're going to be and how they're going to interact with the site, because I feel like for those, the site is really important, more so than a lot of your other works. Are you thinking about a structure around it a lot more then you usually envision a piece? Or when you envision a piece—like the eggs were going to be in a park, but they could also, I think, be in a gallery …

MARTHA: The piece that's the closest in terms of that kind of intervention, like architectural intervention, would be the plug pieces.

HEATHER: Right, of course.

MARTHA: Which were similar in material—they were rubber plugs and they were really trying to plug up the hole or jam into a big hole in the wall.

HEATHER: But that was generally a wall.

MARTHA: Right, but I think the way I was thinking about it was trying to put, maybe it feels academic to think about it this way, because in one sense it was just like . . . what's the fairy tale about the kid who puts his thumb in the dam?

HEATHER: To keep it all from pouring out . . . ?

MARTHA: Yeah, to plug it up. It wasn't just like a big butt plug for the wall or putting your thumb in the hole so the dam doesn't come crashing down, but I was also thinking about it in a kind of academic way where I was grieving the loss of white space, the institutional critique that you can't just put art in a white box anymore, everything's fallen, the structure's kind of fallen apart. You're not allowed to do that anymore. You can't "seriously" be that naïve. So it's sort of lamenting the loss. I just kind of want to put the walls back together so I can just stick a sculpture in there and be done with it. I was sort of thinking about it that way, too. I'm not sure how interesting that is, but I was in that sense thinking about the space, the space where you show art. So with the rubber band pieces, it's again, I'm not sure if it's trying to pull the space apart or hold the space up, you know? I'm not sure if it's about collapsing the space, filling the space, collapsing the space or holding the space together.

HEATHER: Right, right. For the plugs, I don't know where this is going, but the thing that I responded to was the interaction with the material of the wall—because Sheetrock is something that I really love, even though it's so evil.

MARTHA: Why do you love it?

HEATHER: Because it's just so basic and it's like this dry, crumbly stuff that's all just sandwiched between paper and then it becomes everything. It's so basic and it's so around you. And I like the idea of things that are invisible in a way, and Sheetrock becomes invisible.

MARTHA: It just gets painted.

HEATHER: Yeah.

MARTHA: And it is a really dry, crusty material that seems very dead.

HEATHER: Yeah.

MARTHA: When you work with it, it's always unbelievable how chalky and dead it is.

HEATHER: And heavy.

MARTHA: That makes my feet tingle. That makes me feel tingly.

HEATHER: Right, its like the consciousness of it almost starts spreading.

MARTHA: But it's a thing with your work, like in the biennial piece, what's that piece called?

HEATHER: *Something Crossed the Mind (Embellished Three Times).*

MARTHA: I think you get ownership over all the spaces that hold the bigger space together and you get ownership over all of the years of accumulated, weird facades that have been added and subtracted from the architecture; you are claiming or re-claiming those.

HEATHER: I thought of you for a split second when I heard that in China the Koolhaas CCTV building is nicknamed "Big Shorts." And so, in a way—and of course that wasn't his intention and when you make the giant macaroni, you're like, ha-ha, this is a giant macaroni and it brings back childhood memories, but looking at that and seeing big shorts gives me that feeling, too, even though it wasn't necessarily part of the intention. It could be interesting for a space in between that, where it was the intention, but maybe it wasn't as specific or something.

MARTHA: An object, right. It's funny, because when I'm making the macaronis, after I decided to make macaronis, I'm not thinking about them as macaronis, I'm thinking about them as Taurus or a tube, as a shape. I'm thinking of them more as a math shape that I have to get a hold of, mold, dominate. To me, the macaroniness or the found object quality of the thing just disappears because I'm thinking about it as interior space and exterior space and color and density and how to make a mold of it. And so when it all comes together and it becomes again a macaroni necklace, I'm pretty detached from the macaroni at that point. And I would like—I'm hoping with the waffle pieces, they sort of slip—I want them to slip between that kind of abstraction and knowing for the viewer not just me. Knowing where it comes from as an object that we use and recognize, that we have a relationship to, and slipping into pure form, or strange symbolic tablature. I really need that slippage. Because I am thinking of with the cantaloupe pyramid, I'm thinking about testicles and melons and boobs and I'm also thinking about sphere packing. Then I'm (inaudible) like I got to make a mold and then I have to like surface quality and it's like . . .

HEATHER: You were talking about how the waffle that you made, with the 3-D printer and the scanner and then making the model and cast, you go from point A to point B, but then there's all these complications in between and then you get the object and how do you feel when you see the final object? Are you like, a-ha! Is there an a-ha moment?

MARTHA: For me, I find that it's both a liability and a talent, I think, that I've gotten really good at making physical what's in my mind's eye. I can pre-visualize a thing in fairly complex three-dimensional detail and then make it that way. But it's really—the motivation is the desire to see it, like to see it outside of my mind, physically. I don't know exactly why, but I really want to see giant tortured rubber waffles. I've got to get that, I've got to see that. I think when you were talking, I was thinking about in terms of my processes and your processes in the studio is that they do reveal themselves in the final object, mine being, you can read the time spent in the object, you know? You can read the belabored—it's about time and some (inaudible) projects are about time and so are yours, but the tone of the piece, it's a completely different pace. Like the pace is a series of physical experiments with these materials until you get—until you finally find the right arrangement. I'm guessing that's not preconceived. To some degree it can't be preconceived.

HEATHER: I definitely give myself a pretty simple structure in the beginning and then that can evolve. Like with the Whitney piece, it was almost like a drawing in my studio that I had built. And then I just kept moving my (inaudible) around until the composition felt right. And so I was physically involved in how the thing came together, the process . . .

MARTHA: (inaudible)

HEATHER: But what I was thinking about macaroni in terms of the process, when it was draped on that column in the SoHo space, I wonder if the disconnect from the actual making of it became complete, because it seemed like it was kind of funny to be on the column and like after (inaudible) that whole thing, how is that for you? Because I really thought that was a brilliant kind of way to display it . . .

MARTHA: Sort of wrap it around, yeah.

HEATHER: It's a space that's kind of arbitrary, it's not like you made the piece for that, and that's what I like about it. Like you're (inaudible) this giant thing.

MARTHA: If that's what you mean, that's when it went back to being a macaroni. Because I was like, it's a

necklace and the SoHo space has this kind of neck, like a column as a neck and I have a giant necklace and here's the top. I have this giant sculpture as necklace and a giant column as neck, it seemed kind of too obvious not to do, you know? So maybe in that piece, in that circumstance, it became again—or it revealed itself in the end as being a neck with a necklace. But the other thing, the links, the sausage arc, that comes from the idea of, well, it is actually a sausage that I cast, and the sausages do link up in that way, but then they become a balanced canted arc that's freestanding. I don't really know what that is except for maybe being about intestines or loss of gravity or anti-gravity or something. The necklace piece is like hanging all over itself, falling, cascading in a more baroque style, while the "link" piece thing is defying—it's like an engineered, elegant intestine working against gravity.

HEATHER: Right, more like the back and forth balance.

MARTHA: I guess to come full circle, I think in your work the physical and psychological experience of the viewer is more important, as it relates to your—or you sort of orchestrate a strange kind of psychological disintegration, both physical and psychological for the viewer in your work. I think that's really important. So as a question, how much are you thinking about the viewer?

HEATHER: Well, I know that I want the size of the piece to be able to exist as a type of personal architecture, so that it's a spatial experience. So in that way, where I am placing mirrors, which I use all the time, is determined by my body height, which is average. Then the interesting part will be when different types of people interact with the piece. But there is a general thinking of the head in one piece or like little pinpricks all over the body in another piece, so in that way I'm thinking about the viewer. I don't want to orchestrate it to that degree where it's like a (inaudible) piece, it is in some sense, manipulating how you walk through it, but I also want to leave part of it up to the . . .

MARTHA: It's cool, because in your "On Returning" show, what's so amazing about experiencing that piece is the way as you walk through it again, in the end, and get lost in it and get dead-ended by it, it reveals—there's all these—it's surprising how many times it reveals indecisions, both somewhat subtle and kind of aggressive in that like, I can't get through here. I thought this was a passage way and now I'm stuck and then you turn around and you see a bit of glass that you wouldn't have noticed had you not been dead-ended. So you can spend a *lot* of time moving through the space and getting surprised and all these decisions being revealed *and* at the same time, it's kind of lifting up off the floor and your midriff is kind of blocked. It's just a really kind of disconcerting feeling to know that your bottom half and most of your top half is being revealed, but your, like, crotch, stomach, is sort of blocked. But I like also the relationship to the new piece, the hanging piece. In that one, you're sort of lifting up off the floor, and also you didn't know if you were on the inside of a personal structure or the outside of a personal structure. You're like, in terms of materials, it's got a stucco external quality, but then it complicates itself in having internal details and seeming like your—and it's broken up, like it can't possibly actually function as something safe. It's not going to protect you from anything.

HEATHER: Right, at that point . . .

MARTHA: Not even itself. There's no question there, I was just babbling, sorry.