

Slant Step Book:  
The Mysterious Object and the Artworks It Inspired



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**Edited by Francesca Wilmott**

**Verge Center for the Arts  
Sacramento**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Slant Step Forward</i> by Liv Moe. . . . .	.5
<i>Slant Stepping: An Introduction</i> by Francesca Wilmott. . . . .	.9
<i>Slant Steps: An Abridged History</i> by Jacob Stewart-Halevy. . . . .	.21
<i>Enchanted and Slanted</i> by Dan Nadel. . . . .	.33
<i>Slant Step by Step Lessons</i> by Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer. . . . .	.43

## ARTISTS RESPOND

Terry Berlier. . . . .	.54
Gordon Hall. . . . .	.56
Corin Hewitt. . . . .	.58
Aay Preston-Myint. . . . .	.60
Jessi Reaves. . . . .	.62
Mungo Thomson. . . . .	.64
Angela Willetts. . . . .	.66



fig. 1  
Jack Fulton, *Good ol' Slant Step V2*, 1968.

## SLANT STEP FORWARD

Liv Moe

In 1971 art critic and regional artist John Fitz Gibbon, discussing the region's art community, mused, "I would have to say that fear for one's reputation is at a world-minimum in Northern California." Fifty years later, music journalist Aaron Gilbreath made a similar observation in relation to the Sacramento music scene, remarking that the freedom to create in such a place affords the opportunity to make something "pure and lasting and free of corrosive self-awareness."

That combination of obscurity and freedom contributed to one of the most fertile periods in the development of Sacramento's cultural identity. The *Slant Step* has commonly been linked to the University of California, Davis, and the Bay Area through its connection to artists including Stephen Kaltenbach, Bruce Nauman, William T. Wiley, and Robert Arneson. But a detail often overlooked involves its connection to the River City by way of Bill Dalton's gallery, the Art Company. Phil Weidman's 1969 *Slant Step Book* accompanied Dalton's 1970 *Slant Step Show*, creating a compendium of artists and merrymakers representing the renegade spirit of the era.

The idea to embark on a reprint of the *Slant Step Book* was launched at Sacramento's Fox & Goose Public House, a restaurant established by Bill and Denise Dalton in the early 1970s directly across the street from the former Art Company gallery. Francesca Wilmott and I were having lunch in late 2017 while brainstorming exhibition ideas when I told her about a replica of the *Slant Step* I had commissioned from Ron Peetz, an artist featured in Weidman's book. As I described the work to her and my fruitless quest to find an original copy of the book, I mentioned Peetz's desire to see the volume reprinted. Once the relevance of the location where we were seated dawned on us, our destiny was sealed.

Just a few short blocks from the original Art Company site, where the 1970 *Slant Step Show* took place, Verge Center for the Arts has positioned itself at the helm of Sacramento's current cultural renaissance. Operating thirty-seven studios and mounting five exhibitions annually, Verge traces its history to the boisterous, open attitude of the region's midcentury avant-garde. Verge is dedicated to promoting the work of emerging artists, particularly

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those working with experimental forms and nontraditional art practices. Its exhibitions prioritize cultural, racial, and sexual diversity and act as a platform for educating the Sacramento region on new practices, forms, and artists in the larger contemporary art world.

Sometimes really beautiful things can happen in unlikely places like Sacramento. Phil Weidman's *Slant Step Book* is a lasting record of what's possible when a group of artists set out to make work for themselves and each other. In the five decades since, the *Slant Step* has continued to serve as a catalyst for creation, knitting communities of artists together near and far through the appreciation of an absurd and seemingly unlovable object.

An enormous debt of gratitude is owed to Phil Weidman and his family for making this book possible. Thanks also to the Daltons and Ron Peetz for early discussions that brought this project to fruition. I would also like to thank the artists who were willing to discuss their recollections of the *Slant Step* in preparation for this project: Suzanne Adan, Jack Fulton, Nancy Gotthart, Stephen Kaltenbach, Jim Melchert, Frank Owen, Maija Peeples-Bright, Ron Peetz, Louise Pryor, Art Schade, Sandra Shannonhouse, Michael Stevens, Peter VandenBerge, Phil Weidman, Dorothy Wiley, and William T. Wiley. We also thank the Estate of Ray Johnson, the Peter Moore Archive, and the Richard Serra Studio for their help with research. Thanks to the *Slant Step Book* reprint team: designer Damien Saatdjian, editor Tom Fredrickson, copy editor and rights manager Kathy Borgogno, and curatorial intern Alice Xin Chen. And last but not least, our gratitude goes to artists Terry Berlier, Gordon Hall, Corin Hewitt, Aay Preston-Myint, Jessi Reaves, Mungo Thompson, and Angela Willetts, who in these pages and in Verge's exhibition, *Slant Step Forward*, demonstrate the *Slant Step*'s enduring legacy.

Liv Moe  
Founding Director  
Verge Center for the Arts

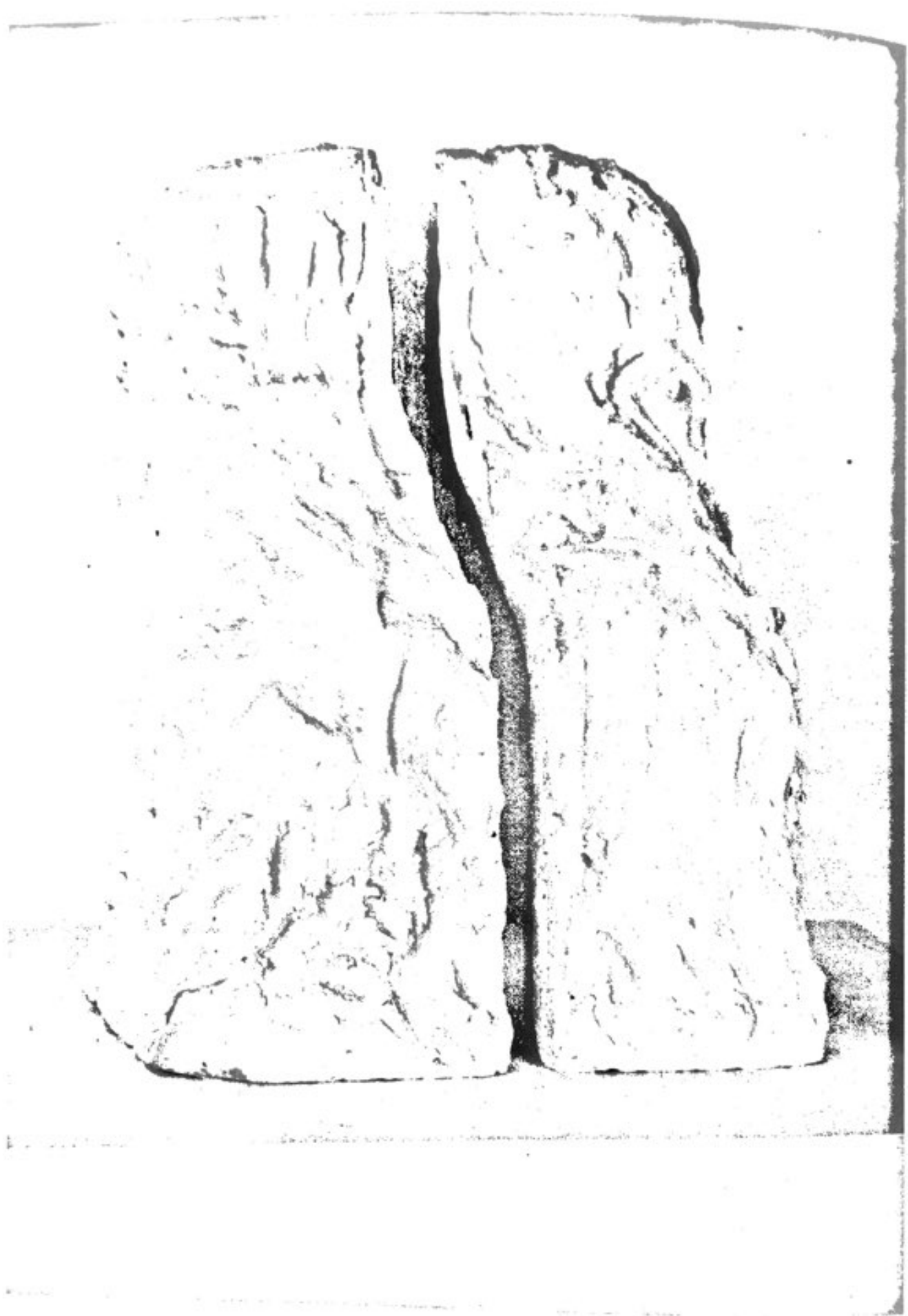


fig. 2  
Bruce Nauman, *Mold for a Modernized Slant Step*, 1966. Plaster,  $18\frac{1}{4} \times 14\frac{1}{2} \times 13\frac{3}{8}$  in.  
( $46.4 \times 36.8 \times 34$  cm). Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Gerald S. Elliott Collection,  
1995.70.a-b.



## SLANT STEPPING: AN INTRODUCTION

Francesca Wilmott

Sprawled out flat on the grass with his arms overhead, a shirtless man is in thrall to a peculiar wooden object. Covered in worn linoleum, the rogue piece of furniture looks like a step stool; however, instead of providing a flat, sturdy surface, it slopes down, making it difficult to discern any readily understandable use. The incongruity between its elegant arched back and the ordinariness of its materials further confuses an already bewildering scene. Along its base, a curvilinear cut-out slots perfectly over the man's neck. Held captive, he searches its interior, perhaps looking for answers to questions that continue to evade us fifty years later. While he is temporarily arrested by this object—now known as the *Slant Step*—he is not alone. Flipping past the cover of *Slant Step Book*, we encounter responses by more than a dozen artists who identified with the scrappy spirit of the *Slant Step* in the late 1960s.

Artist Phil Weidman posed for the cover of and subsequently published *Slant Step Book* in Sacramento in 1969, just four years after William T. Wiley, a member of the art faculty at the University of California, Davis, found this object at the Mount Carmel Salvage Shop in Mill Valley, California. As the now-legendary tale goes, Wiley gifted the found object to his graduate student Bruce Nauman, who used it in his UC Davis studio as a footrest.<sup>1</sup> In 1966 the object prompted the first of many exhibitions, *The Slant Step Show* at San Francisco's Berkeley Gallery, whereupon Richard Serra stole it and absconded with it to New York to make his own rendition (fig. 10).<sup>2</sup> Thus, began a series of bicoastal exchanges and innumerable *Slant Step*-inspired works, as Jacob Stewart-Halevy, Dan Nadel, and Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer detail in the essays that follow.<sup>3</sup> On the fiftieth anniversary of *Slant Step Book*, Verge Center for the Arts looks to Weidman's volume in an attempt to better understand how the *Slant Step* has embodied the issues of its time and has begotten a new generation of artists who work across the United States and carry forward its legacy today.<sup>4</sup>

The step stool is a marginal class of furniture, tucked out of sight and only put to use in the most inconvenient of circumstances. A defective step stool serves as an apt metaphor for artists working outside urban centers in the late 1960s who occasionally rose to national fame and were soon forgotten.

The *Slant Step* has not only become a symbol for regional American art centers but also for artists whose works and identities cannot be easily absorbed into established categories. In 1966 Wiley made a lead version of the *Slant Step* that he “dedicated to all the despised unknown unloved people objects ideas that just don’t make it and never will who have so thoughtlessly given their time and talent to become objects of scorn but maintain an innocent ignorance and never realize that you hate them” (*Slant Step Book*, p. 27). Throughout its travels, the *Slant Step* has brought together an informal family of artists bound not by geography, artistic style, or age, but instead by their affinity with its outcast character.

Though the maker of the original found object remains unknown, Wiley and Nauman quickly set about inserting the *Slant Step* into an artistic lineage that traced back to Marcel Duchamp. Indeed, after Duchamp’s death in 1968 Wiley’s droll anti-art assemblages earned him the moniker “Huckleberry Duchamp.”<sup>5</sup> As a result of its travels and the growing reputations of Wiley and Nauman, the *Slant Step* helped put the art of Northern California on the map, leading Grace Glueck of the *New York Times* to ask readers in 1968, “What? You don’t know about the slant step, an object as famous on the Coast as the fur-lined teacup once was in Paris?”<sup>6</sup> In the tradition of its Dada and Surrealist forbearers, the *Slant Step* is not simply a useless object: it actively refutes functionality. Stepping on the *Slant Step* for a leg up might just level you flat on your back. Rather than a stool used by artists to elevate themselves, perhaps it is more useful to think of the *Slant Step* as a vessel that assumes the identities of those who come into its orbit.<sup>7</sup>

In the mid-1960s the *Slant Step* came to oppose everything New York Minimalism represented: the *Slant Step* is ugly, self-deprecating, and ripe with evocative potential.<sup>8</sup> Many artists working in Northern California made use of their distance to nurture eccentric career paths that critic John Fitz Gibbon described as “heterodox only with respect to the concerns of mainstream art.”<sup>9</sup> In 1966 Nauman made two seemingly unrelated works that demonstrate his attunement with sculpture’s fraught position at that moment: his *Slant Step*-inspired sculpture *Mold for a Modernized Slant Step* (fig. 2) and the drawing *Seated Storage Capsule (For Henry Moore)* (fig. 3). In the 1960s Moore’s monumental figurative sculptures represented the vestiges of the modernist tradition, and he became a frequent subject in Nauman’s work. Nauman’s rendering of Moore’s entombed figure and the undulating shape of his *Mold for a Modernized Slant Step* bear an uncanny likeness, as though his sculpture had literally buried Moore’s body beneath its layers of plaster. Anne Wagner has argued that by using his own body as a model for the cast-iron sculpture *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* of 1967, Nauman not only “struck at sculpture as both body and thing” but, more important, “becomes hostage to himself,” thus recognizing his complicit

relationship with the medium.<sup>10</sup> Split down the middle, Nauman's *Mold for a Modernized Slant Step* and his drawing of Moore threaten to crack open and resuscitate the very traditions that he was attempting to undo from within. Peering into the plaster interior of *Mold*, one can see that it is in fact a hollow cast—the body has already gone missing.

Nauman and his Northern Californian compatriots were fighting a battle on multiple fronts: They were not only reckoning with their place within modernist orthodoxies, as represented by Moore, but they were also in discord with the ascendancy of Minimalism, which appeared to be asserting a new formal doctrine in their place. As Wagner observed, "One of the tenets—even the clichés—of Minimalism is that it puts the viewer in mind of his or her body. In Nauman, by contrast, the body Minimalism was content merely to gesture toward is somehow actively immobilized...; through that process body and sculpture are meant to become quite scarily alike."<sup>11</sup> The latent bodily associations of the *Slant Step*, everything from a footrest to a "squatty potty,"<sup>12</sup> personified something of Nauman and his Northern California peers as they attempted to recover the body that was seemingly absent from New York Minimalism.

If we are to understand the *Slant Step* as a vessel for its time and a surrogate for the artist's body, it goes without saying that its meaning has evolved as different generations have co-opted it with different intents. Of the many *Slant Step*-inspired initiatives over the years, Weidman's *Slant Step Book* and a 1970 exhibition at Bill Dalton's gallery, the Art Company, in Sacramento, represented the first true transference of the object to a new community of artists.<sup>13</sup> Sometime in 1967 the *Slant Step* made its way back from New York, and "sitting on a pile of garbage," it traveled across the Central Valley and took up residence at Sacramento State College (now California State University, Sacramento).<sup>14</sup> Writing in 1965 of her hometown, Joan Didion said that many of Sacramento's "most solid citizens sense about themselves a kind of functional obsolescence."<sup>15</sup> As the city's national identity shifted from a gold-mining town to California's state capital and agricultural center, artists found it difficult to gain visibility in the region outside the university.<sup>16</sup> The *Slant Step* thus became an instantly recognizable symbol in a city—and an art scene—that was struggling to define its purpose.

The artist Frank Owen began using the *Slant Step* as a model in his drawing classes at Sacramento State, where Weidman was reacquainted with it after first seeing it in Nauman's studio several years earlier. "I caught Slant Step Fever," Weidman recalled.<sup>17</sup> He began making works such as *Slant Step Peeping Tom* and *Slant Step Slump* (*SSB*, p. 25) and covered his head with his *Hairy Slant Step* (*SSB*, p. 31) in a 1968 performance at Sacramento State. Weidman soon set to work on *Slant Step Book*, inviting

artists from across the country—such as Jack Edwards (*SSB*, p. 22), Ray Johnson (*SSB*, p. 30), and Stephen Kaltenbach (*SSB*, pp. 34–35)—to contribute responses alongside already recognizable Northern California works. In the sheer variety of contributions by artists and poets working across the nation, Weidman's book imagined a transregional artistic community defined more by its differences than any aesthetic unity.

Despite their stylistic diversity, the 1969 *Slant Step Book* and 1970 exhibition also provide a visual account of the peripheral place of female artists at the time. The book's inclusion of only one female artist corresponded with gender disparities within university art programs and the art world at large: The 1969 Whitney Annual, for example, included only eight women out of the 151 artists in the show.<sup>18</sup> In addition to serving as a proxy and prop for male artists since Wiley and Nauman found it, the *Slant Step* at times has also represented a female vessel.<sup>19</sup> In Edward Higgins's drawing *Semi-Classical Slant Step* (fig. 4; included in the 1970 exhibition but not the book), the shape of two bodies entangled in an erotic embrace echo the slope of the *Slant Step*. While no work by a woman was included in the 1970 exhibition at the Art Company, a belly dancer performed at the private opening gala.

Weidman included Dorothy Wiley's photographs of a planning meeting for the 1966 show at the Berkeley Gallery (*SSB*, pp. 9–10), illustrating the many female artists who participated in early *Slant Step* conversations but were ultimately not present in the exhibition.<sup>20</sup> For the 1966 show, Jeanette Wiley parodied *Slant Step* fandom in a letter from the "Slant Step Corporation of America" warning "Gentlemen" to "be on your guard" and "collect those little devils (if it's not too late) and forward them immediately to us ... for the continuance of our research."<sup>21</sup> Dorothy Wiley's miniature fabric sculpture titled *Jeweled Slant Step* (fig. 5) and Louise Pryor's slanted cloth shoes played upon corporeal associations of the *Slant Step*.<sup>22</sup> Crowned with her son's tooth, *Jeweled Slant Step* seems to wryly acknowledge the reliquary status that artists bestowed upon the *Slant Step*, as when her then-husband, William T. Wiley, monumentalized it in lead and buried Excedrin tablets beneath its surface (*SSB*, p. 27). In contrast to the physicality of William T. Wiley and Nauman's *Slant Step* works, Dorothy Wiley and Pryor's soft sculptures could be discreetly stowed away in a pocket or slipped on one's feet, testifying to the *Slant Step*'s close relationship to the body as it traveled through time and space.

Weidman's influential artists' book captured the irreverent spirit that attracted artists to the *Slant Step* in the late 1960s, and like the found object, the book journeyed from Northern California into the world. His volume has served for many as an introduction to the *Slant Step*, and in characteristic

fashion, it raises more questions than it answers, keeping its mysteries safely enshrined. After publishing the *Slant Step Book*, Weidman remained the custodian of the *Slant Step* until 1973, when the object traveled back East to Frank Owen. Owen regularly used it as a teaching tool in universities for nearly four decades and in the early 1980s established the New York Society for the Preservation of the *Slant Step* with the artists Wayne E. Campbell and Arthur G. Schade to acknowledge its ownerless status.<sup>23</sup> In 2012 the society donated the *Slant Step* to UC Davis and it again journeyed west, where it now resides at the university's Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art.

Just as the variety of contributions in *Slant Step Book* reveals the heterogeneity of 1960s art—a quality championed by this wayward stool, if not upheld by all of its devotees—the contemporary artists who carry forward the *Slant Step*'s legacy are not uniform in their orientation toward the object. In 2006 the writer Sarah Ahmed wrote in *Queer Phenomenology*, “To be oriented is also to be turned toward certain objects, those that help us to find our way.... To queer phenomenology is to offer a different ‘slant’ to the concept of orientation itself.”<sup>24</sup> Using Ahmed's framework for object orientation, this project seeks to understand what has led so many to turn toward the *Slant Step* over the years and looks to the less-visible forces—the bodies in absentia—that have sustained it to the present. For the *Slant Step Book*'s fiftieth anniversary, we have invited seven artists from across the United States—Terry Berlier, Gordon Hall, Corin Hewitt, Aay Preston-Myint, Jessi Reaves, Mungo Thomson, and Angela Willetts—to respond to the *Slant Step* within these pages and the spaces of Verge's exhibition.

Many of the *Slant Step*'s contemporary descendants, including Berlier, Thomson, and Willetts, trace a direct biographical or academic line to the Davis-Sacramento region and, like the *Slant Step*, have gone on to national and international renown. Within the *Slant Step*'s chosen lineage can be added Hall, Hewitt, Preston-Myint, and Reaves, who share a kinship with the object despite their more tenuous relationship with its Californian origins. It was on a shelf in Owen's study at the University of Vermont in 1995 that Hewitt first encountered the *Slant Step* as a young artist.<sup>25</sup> Hewitt, who now teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University (where Owen briefly brought the *Slant Step* in the early 1980s), introduced Hall to the object when Hall was a visiting artist at VCU in 2016. Their contributions to Verge's show remind us that, as Ahmed put it, “life is not always linear” and that “the lines that we follow do not always lead us to the same place.”<sup>26</sup> These artworks demonstrate that the lines that connect different corners of the country, and the past with the present, are more slanted than they are straight.

In 2016, responding to a North Carolina bill that sought to restrict bathroom access based on one's sex assigned at birth, Hall turned to the *Slant Step*, writing:

We identify things in terms of their function and move on, reading passively. We learn only as much as we need to know. This object, compelling to so many in the past 50 years, is compelling to me as well, insofar as it encourages me to read more slowly. It makes me want to see it as more than one thing at once, or as many different things in quick succession. Looking to the slant step as a teacher, I want to learn what it seems to already know—I can't always know what I am looking at.<sup>27</sup>

The *Slant Step* is not just a California story. It belongs to all who can identify with Wiley's dedication to the "despised unknown unloved people objects ideas," across geographies and generations. In a perpetual state of motion since Wiley and Nauman salvaged it in 1965, the *Slant Step* has defied the odds. It is still stepping—across time and into new unmapped spaces.



fig. 6

William T. Wiley, *Slant Step Becomes Rhino/Rhino Becomes Slant Step*, 1966. Plaster, acrylic, paint, and chain, 22 × 12 × 12 in. (55.8 × 30.5 × 30.5 cm). Collection of Ron Wagner and Bonnie Ruder.

SLANT STEPS: AN ABRIDGED HISTORY  
Jacob Stewart-Halevy

Sometime in late December 1965, twenty-eight-year-old William T. Wiley showed up at the studios of the MFA program at the University of California, Davis, where he taught. He had just returned from a thrift store in Marin County with something under his arm: a Christmas present for his student Bruce Nauman. Nauman knew what Wiley was holding. The two had been to the Mount Carmel Salvage Shop to admire it, and Nauman had already drawn it from memory. Wiley returned many times by himself and publicly expressed his wonder over an object hidden away in the back corner of the shop and its reasons for being there. From what time period did this thing come from? Wiley wondered. Who could have made it, and for what purpose? Since Wiley was a professor and Nauman, a student, what was the *Slant Step*'s lesson supposed to be? Wiley's thrift-store offering to Nauman seems to have been an invitation to join his band of "amateurs" and take part in their games around ambition, failure, and provincial anonymity.

At least initially, Nauman seemed ready to play. He found an idle use for the *Slant Step* as a footrest in his studio—a way to take breaks from making his art. "It was perfect," Nauman recalled, "you can put your feet on *Slant Step* and then you can lean back in the chair."<sup>1</sup> The correspondence between the slanting step and the needs of the body would become a governing principle, not merely in Nauman's studio leisure time, but also in his sculptural investigations. Meanwhile, he painted a delicate academic watercolor study of the step's marbleized surface and proceeded to cast its form to create the work *Mold for a Modernized Slant Step* (1966; fig. 2). The mold's mottled plaster, split in two parts, revealed an empty void that stood for the original—or the possibility of reproducing its future "modernized" versions in multiple. At least this seems to have been the impetus behind Nauman's *Slant Step Film* at the time. Made in collaboration with William Allan, it served as a DIY instructional guide to building further slanted steps; it was, Nauman remembered, a "parody of a shop film."<sup>2</sup>

As part of this project, Nauman made the drawing *Modern (Production) Slant Stool (Small Edition Cast in Fiberglass)* (1966). Here, the step appears in two-point perspective with a heavy outline and a hint of shadow to show where the fiberglass would curve between the slope and riser. It is a much



smoother version of the *Slant Step*, and because it was intended to be entirely molded, Nauman left instructions that the back should remain open with “support ribs inside,” indicating that the step stool would be reinforced from within. Nauman’s proposed *Slant Step* would be modern, efficient, and well built. He seemed to want to improve it.

Meanwhile, Wiley made his own variety of *Slant Steps* from 1966 to 1967, often appealing to an arch neoprimitivist aesthetic. In an early version from 1966 entitled *Slant Step Becomes Rhino/Rhino Becomes Slant Step* (fig. 6), he inserted rough chain material into a gray-dyed plaster seat, meant to call to mind the violent phallic horn of a rhinoceros and to allude to the kind of “ethnographic surrealism” he was reading at the time.<sup>3</sup> The layer of plaster circling the rhinoceros horn appears to have dried in the middle of its liquid descent down the slant. The first part of the title is inscribed at the top, leading us to believe the step is midway through its transformation into the rhinoceros, while the reverse is written at the bottom of the step, indicating that the middle passage of the slant is metamorphic—an uneven, liminal space between the animate and inanimate, or more probably a space where these notions of animism that had pervaded the art of the moment could be mocked.

More significant than Wiley’s individual efforts was the way his group of fellow artists rallied to the *Slant Step*, inspiring the poet William Withrup to compose *The Slant Chant* (*Slant Step Book*, pp. 14–19) and organize a show of works devoted to the original at the Berkeley Gallery in San Francisco in 1966. By the late summer of that year, Wiley came with that “ugly object, probably an old shoe shine stand,” to Withrup’s apartment in Potrero Hill, where Nauman, Wiley, artist James Melchert, the filmmaker Robert Nelson, and others gathered. Melchert remembers that after many more meetings and a period of indecision, Wiley offered the group an ultimatum: make the *Slant Step* the focus of the show or he would withdraw his support for the gallery. The others acquiesced with “varying degrees of enthusiasm.”<sup>4</sup>

When *The Slant Step Show* opened—lasting only a week in mid-September—it became the staging ground for all manner of quasi-cultic devotion.<sup>5</sup> Even if no one was paying much attention to their work, the artists could at least pretend to make the exhibition the object of intense scrutiny and enormous publicity. The night before the opening, Wiley, Robert Hudson, William Allan, and William Geis covertly removed each version of the *Slant Step* from its base and piled them haphazardly in the corner of the gallery. They left only the original step and Melchert’s ceramic *Anti-Slant Step* (fig. 7) on their pedestals and Allan’s watercolors, of the step sinking into water, up on the wall. Hudson and Geis placed a transparent plastic version of the step on the pile in the corner.

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When *The Slant Step Show* opened—lasting only a week in mid-September—it became the staging ground for all manner of quasi-cultic devotion.<sup>5</sup> Even if no one was paying much attention to their work, the artists could at least pretend to make the exhibition the object of intense scrutiny and enormous publicity. The night before the opening, Wiley, Robert Hudson, William Allan, and William Geis covertly removed each version of the *Slant Step* from its base and piled them haphazardly in the corner of the gallery. They left only the original step and Melchert’s ceramic *Anti-Slant Step* (fig. 7) on their pedestals and Allan’s watercolors, of the step sinking into water, up on the wall. Hudson and Geis placed a transparent plastic version of the step on the pile in the corner.

When the exhibition opened the next afternoon, the audience responded in kind, poking and “pawing” through the pile, as Nauman put it later, dragging works out to look at them more closely.<sup>6</sup> That night Witherup performed *The Slant Chant*; Allan and Nauman screened one of their films; Wiley and Richard Pervier, another Berkeley Gallery member, displayed a version of the *Slant Step* cast in cement and inscribed with Roman numerals (fig. 14). The object looks like a Mussolini-era architectural model of a fascist luge course. It rested on the sidewalk outside the gallery until it was stolen later that night. Meanwhile, Melchert burst out singing “I Wonder Who’s Slanting Her Now,” a raunchy rendition of the popular lovelorn ballad.<sup>7</sup> The night ended with a raffle. Attendees purchased tickets for a dollar, and somewhere between ten and fifteen art “prizes” were awarded, but the *Slant Step* was not among them.

Reviewing the show for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Alfred Frankenstein wrote: “There are slant steps made of bread, of colored plastic with electric lights inside, of wood and metal and silk and probably of chewing gum, too; it’s that kind of show.”<sup>8</sup> There was no work with chewing gum, but Frankenstein knew well enough not to indulge the artists with too much detail.<sup>9</sup> Toward the exhibition’s closing, Richard Serra stole the *Slant Step* from the gallery as it was being less-than-vigilantly watched by Nauman and Paul Heald. Serra brought it with him to New York, sending postcards of its travels to the gallery.

In the absence of the original, slanted steps continued to proliferate in the periphery of the American art world for years to come. Artists bejeweled their versions and placed children’s baby teeth inside (see fig. 5). They hewed steps from tree trunks, mushed them together from jellybeans, and baked step-shaped loaves of bread. They made slanted shoes. They drew the step, tongue-in-cheek, in the manner of their academic life-drawing training or on their flabby chests as faux prison tattoos. Like scientists authenticating their own Veil of Veronica, they created falsified evidence attesting to its obscure nineteenth-century origins. Meanwhile, they wrote confessional letters about their intimate involvement with the object and made bureaucratic conceptual art proposals involving its travel through the US Postal Service.<sup>10</sup> They ran over their versions at sixty miles an hour, held funerals for, cremated, and buried their steps deep in the earth. The *Slant Step* had become a fetish, or a mock fetish—with all of the frenetic activity around it, it was hard to tell.

From 1966 until 1968, while artists made their endless renditions, the original *Slant Step* was mailed and driven back and forth from San Francisco to New York, Philadelphia, Sacramento, and Bolinas. The Sacramento-based collectors Malcolm and Judith Weintraub transported the step across

Five ( 5 ) Things You Can Do With Your SLANT STEP:

- 1) PLAN TESTS
- 2) SLAP TENTS
- 3) SET PLANTS
- 4) TEST PLANS
- 5) EAT SPL'NTS

Five ( 5 ) Things You Can Do With Your ANTI-SLANT STEP:

- 1) PAN LATIN TESTS
- 2) STAIN PANTLETS
- 3) TAP STALIN'S NET
- 4) PLATE NAN'S TITS
- 5) PIN ATLAS' TENTS

Jim Melchert

the country, using it as a footrest in flight, eventually delivering it back to Nauman in San Francisco. No longer in need of the step and happy to rid himself of its lingering associations with his art, Nauman unloaded the *Slant Step* onto Bill Yates in Sacramento. The magnetism of the lowly step discovered by Wiley at the Mount Carmel Salvage Shop only seemed to grow as it reached a wider audience and penetrated deeper into the regional American art world. The initial mock devotion turned into a kind of manic, aggressive fandom, directed as much at the *Slant Step* itself as at the artists associated with the original exhibition.

By 1969 Phil Weidman, a student at Sacramento State College (now California State University, Sacramento), remarked that after seeing the step in Nauman's studio, he "caught Slant Step Fever" and "started making *Slant Step* related stuff. Dumb stuff like *Slant Step Under Cover*, *Slant Step Peeping Tom*, *Slant Step Slump* and *Grafted Slant Step*."<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Weidman made *Hairy Slant Step* by covering his wooden version of the step with human hair collected from the floor of a Sacramento barbershop, wearing it as part of his participation in an exhibition at Sacramento State, and canning the leftover hair. Afterward, Ron Peetz covertly shepherded the original step to a nearby military hospital at McClellan Air Force Base near Sacramento (where he worked on weekends in the Army Reserve) and made X-rays of the object in order to find out more about it (*SSB*, p. 4). Unlike their more cosmopolitan counterparts, the prospect of military service loomed for the Sacramento State artists. Weidman had just come back from a tour in Vietnam, and Peetz's brothers were wounded there. As both artists have argued, the predominantly working-class students in the department were using their education to escape the draft. Rather than produce overt antiwar art however, many of them diverted their energies into the *Slant Step*.<sup>12</sup>

The charades around the *Slant Step* allowed the Sacramento-based artists to link their activities to the cohort at UC Davis and to broader concerns in contemporary art at the time. Peetz, for instance, composed *Slant Step Recipe* (*SSB*, p. 32). This disgusting concoction may be thought of as a "turn" in the long conversation among artists about the qualities of the *Slant Step*, a way of separating out its discrete elements and recombining them. At the same time, it provided a convoluted history of devotion to the object as seen from Peetz's marginal perspective. His inclusion of "ingredients" such as Wiley's "enigmatic dog-barf" and the equation of Nauman's *Slant Step* mold with Jell-O are Oedipal attacks on Wiley's jokes and the "soft-shape" forms Nauman made as a student. By 1969 Wiley and Nauman were exhibiting at *When Attitudes Become Form*, an international exhibition in Bern, and Nauman had already escaped to New York. Through their parodies, Weidman and Peetz hoped to insert themselves into the narrative of the *Slant*

*Step*, perhaps as a way of opening up similar career opportunities or merely tending to the cultic activity around the step while it was being relinquished by its original devotees.

By the onset of the 1970s the Sacramento artists went to extreme lengths to create and discover new versions of the *Slant Step*. Yates perused the thrift stores of the Central Valley in order to find examples of the *Slant Step*'s original materials, finally settling on vintage linoleum from a Colusa-area hardware store attic. The result was *Unslanted Step*, a version that had lost its slope. The mail artist Ray Johnson came to Sacramento State on Weidman and Peetz's invitation. While there, he hoped to find a duck to give as a pet to one of the school's painting instructors, Joseph Raffael. Unable to find a suitable waterfowl, he instead gave Raffael a rabbit—a Fluxusian nod to Wittgenstein.<sup>13</sup> Johnson commemorated the event with the work on paper *Duck Slant Step Pets* (fig. 9), in which a crude drawing of a duck/rabbit rests on the slanting neck of a horse. Around the horse's body Johnson wrote the names of nearly eighty artists, critics, and other art world figures.<sup>14</sup> Each name is relegated to a particular position on the animal, which works as a totem to encompass or make sense of art world networks at the time.

In the following years, artists made still more films, poems, and copies of the *Slant Step*, often accompanied by erotic drawings, doodles, and collages.<sup>15</sup> In this manner, nth-order anti- and then meta-*Slant Step* renditions were made and continue today in a region where artists have made skate parks in the image of the *Slant Step* and animated it with computer-modeling software.<sup>16</sup> The original was eventually stolen once more—this time by a stranger and completely by accident—and then recovered by the police after having been dumped on a roadside in Albuquerque, an improbable event that surely added to its aura.

Hagiographic accounts of these activities are recounted in detail in Weidman's early compilation and a brief catalogue that accompanied a 1983 UC Davis exhibition *The "Slant Step" Revisited*. By 2013 the Sacramento-based artist Stephen Kaltenbach uploaded "How to Make a Slant Step (Short Version)" on YouTube (fig. 15),<sup>17</sup> which he made in collaboration with David E. Stone. The video reprises Nauman and Allan's early but unfinished "how-to" *Slant Step Film* while embracing the already established genre of short-form instructional videos for domestic repairs that proliferate on the Internet. With this video, Kaltenbach and Stone seemed to enlarge a circle that once contained only Nauman and Wiley to include anyone who would like to join. It is an ambiguous nod to "maker culture," extending the long tail of the *Slant Step* to other ratified members who can continue its legend through their own encounters with it. Through an endless sequence of inside jokes, hijinks, and one-upmanship, therefore, the object has

attained a mythic status not merely among the group but also with those who continue to associate with it.

In secular interaction rituals like those that have grown up around the *Slant Step*, the relationship between members of a group is symbolized by the focus of the ritual. When members go on to use these touchstones in settings outside the group, they are reminded of their membership. When they are tended to, symbols like the *Slant Step* attain a collective charge, one that is always in danger of dying out or losing its significance if members do not reassemble to reenact the ritual. The very survival of the symbol depends on the reassembly of the group, just as its dissemination to broader social circles depends on the charge it maintains—both for those who partake in the ritual around the symbol and those who recognize or attempt to desecrate its power from the outside.<sup>18</sup>

The mock devotion to the *Slant Step* of Wiley and others was ultimately a social act, a collective endeavor, meant to accomplish a series of transformations for their circle. It mattered little if they authentically believed in or worshipped their lowly step. It was more important that they could convince others of their devotion and gain a new set of entitlements in doing so. They could play with the presumptions and expectations of their audiences. Only then could they reposition themselves with respect to their predecessors and contemporaries and, above all, adopt a different stance toward their artwork and each other.

## ENCHANTED AND SLANTED

Dan Nadel

This should come as no surprise to readers of *Slant Step Book*, but perhaps the ultimate function of that strange proto-squatty potty is as a kind of social and historical planet that pulls all manner of flotsam and jetsam into its gravitational field. Like the 1966 show itself, which was less an exhibition and more an action. And like me, here, in Brooklyn in 2019, tasked with explaining the *Slant Step*'s life in New York. Short answer: Not much of one. It was known by readers of art magazines but otherwise not part of the dialogue. Long answer: It spawned a narrative I couldn't have cooked up under any kind of pressure.

Futzing around for a New York foothold in the 1983 chronology by Cynthia Charters,<sup>1</sup> I fixated on a passage in which she describes Richard Serra bringing the *Slant Step* to New York and then Audrey Sabol taking it to Philadelphia. This seemed like a story. Serra's family was still in San Francisco at the time, and Sabol is a collector with an extraordinary eye who, often with Joan Kron, mounted several important exhibitions during the 1960s at the Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association. Needless to say, young well-off Jewish women have often been at the vanguard of modernism, and Philadelphia was early to avant-garde art in the 1960s. Sabol in particular was well connected with New York dealers and art *machers* such as Billy Kluver, who served as an informal adviser first to Sabol and then to both she and Kron. In May 1962 Sabol conceived of the first Pop art show on the East Coast: *Art 1963/A New Vocabulary*. In 1966 the duo mounted *How the West Has Done! a Wild West Show*, which featured Robert Arneson, Vija Celmins, Darrell Forney, Joe Goode, Paul Harris, Robert Hudson, John McCracken, James Melchert, Frank Owen, Ed Ruscha, Wayne Thiebaud, Leonard Wheatley, and William T. Wiley. See some familiar names? Kron and Sabol's finale with the YM-YWHA was *The Museum of Merchandise*, a massive blowout of artist multiples produced just for the occasion. In soliciting support from Xerox, Kron wrote, "In this exhibit we are exploring a new philosophic approach to art, bridging the gap between artist and designer. Our aim is to 'take the artist out of the ivory tower and put him into the control tower,' in the words of Marshall McLuhan."<sup>2</sup>

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January 22, 1967, Serra wrote Sabol asking to be considered for inclusion in the forthcoming exhibition and listed among his bodies of work "hide-a-beds (Murphy beds), Castro convertibles and slant steps." Indeed, there is a record of just one Serra *Slant Step: Slant Step Folded* (fig. 10), a wall-hanging rubber sculpture that resembles the step unfurled, flattened, and left to flap in the breeze. Serra's earliest rubber works, before he started hardening them, have the informal and gnarly quality of Bruce Nauman's 1965 fiberglass and polyester resin works. Listed among the works in *The Museum of Merchandise* is "Dressing room—Richard Serra, with complete rubber wardrobe by Nancy Graves." Also for sale were a ring by Marisol; Andy Warhol's silver coke bottle for toilet water; a Plexiglas litter basket by Arman that allowed the owner to keep a scrapbook of his or her life and that sold for \$1,000 (including the trash); a transistorized blinking "Eat" pin that would run for five hours designed by Robert Indiana. Notably, William Allan and Wiley were also contributors, along with Arneson and Melchert.

Later that year Sabol and Kron actualized a billboard project, memorialized in a photograph the Archives of American Art initially identified as "Four people outside with Roy Lichtenstein's billboard Super sunset" (fig. 11).<sup>3</sup> The only reason for the photo session, I assume, is the billboard itself. It came about because in 1966 Kron and Sabol conceived of an "outdoor" museum that would feature billboards by contemporary artists. The problem was that billboards were on the wane, and the city was very much against it. However, Lichtenstein, with whom the two had worked before, agreed to contribute and designed a work, *Super Sunset*, for that purpose. As Kron recalled: "We could not get a billboard. There were none free, and so we were sitting at Audrey's house and looking out the window at this big blank handball backboard, and it is just staring at the face. Somebody must've said, Why don't we [paint] on there. Why don't we paint the billboard in the backyard. So that's what we did."<sup>4</sup>

Sabol and Kron threw a party for the billboard, and it was either at that party or very shortly thereafter—perhaps on November 16—that Malcolm and Judith Weintraub of Sacramento arrived. Malcolm remembers the night well.<sup>5</sup> They were on a trip to New York and decided to visit Sabol, who was a good friend of Judith's. They attended a dinner party with Audrey and her husband, Ed. Judith sat next to Serra, who also happened to be visiting. The conversation turned to where they're from. Judith said, "Sacramento." Serra asked: "Do you know Bruce Nauman?" "Yes." Serra said, "I have something, and would you take it back to Bruce Nauman?" Then he got up, went outside to his car, and schlepped the *Slant Step* in. He left it in front of the door, so it served as a doorstop for the rest of the evening while they all finished dinner. For whatever reason—and perhaps we'll never know (Serra's studio has not responded to my queries)—Serra had brought the *Slant Step* to Audrey

Sabol's home. It was not on account of her interest. She referred to it as "one of the dumbest things I'd ever seen." And yet there it was.

The Weintraubs stayed overnight at the Sabol home, and the next morning the photograph was shot. In the picture are Judith, Audrey, Ed and Malcolm. Later that day the Weintraubs drove back to New York and took a flight to Sacramento. Malcolm sat with the *Slant Step* in front of him, in a coach, with his feet propped on it, his knees up. Then, he remembered, "I schlepped it with my raincoat over my arm, covering the *Slant Step*, from the airport back home." Once home, Judith called Nauman, who was then in his San Francisco live/work storefront studio. They planned a trip to San Francisco. They walked in and said, "We are delivering this to you for Richard Serra." "Oh, ok, put it there." They put it on the floor, Nauman went to the back room of the space, and they left. And that was the last time the Weintraubs saw the *Slant Step*.

Now, how did Malcolm and Judith Weintraub of Sacramento come to know Audrey Sabol of Villanova? Malcolm is a native of Sacramento, and he and Judith settled in the city in 1957. They were always interested in art and got to know Wayne Thiebaud, who remains a close friend. Malcolm and Judith each posed for Thiebaud. (It was through Thiebaud and his life at University of California, Davis, that they met Wiley and Nauman, whose work the Weintraubs were aware of quite early.) Sabol had been aware of Thiebaud's work since the early 1960s and commissioned him to paint a portrait of her daughter, Blair, in the summer of 1965, and that painting became *Girl in White Boots*. She and Blair had been in Los Angeles with the dealer Rolf Nelson. The Weintraubs knew Nelson from their art-viewing trips to the city. Introductions were made. Thiebaud didn't have air conditioning; the Weintraubs did. And so they hosted Sabol, who had no need to sweat it out in the studio.

And so a loop from UC Davis to Philadelphia and back again is completed. Except then it loops back again.

In September 1967 long-haired and bead-wearing Stephen Kaltenbach, who studied at UC Davis from 1963 to 1967, arrived in New York. Always uneasy with the idea of being aligned with a "regional" aesthetic, he'd stayed out of the fray while in Davis. But once in New York, in the grip of his ongoing interest in what would later be called Minimal and Conceptual art, he took on the *Slant Step*. In January 1968 he took a teaching job at the School of Visual Arts and had his students "identify the Slant Step and interview other people asking its identity."<sup>6</sup> He was a hustler—going out a lot, talking to artists—and was consumed with the idea of getting a show: "I thought I was the most ambitious guy I met in New York."<sup>7</sup> It paid off. Rosa Esman, who,

with her Tanglewood Press, was an early producer of multiples for artists, offered to make something with him in 1969.

At Kaltenbach's request, Bill Yates—to whom Nauman had given the step in Bolinas—mailed it, "wrapped in viscuine [Visqueen, a plastic sheeting] and tied with rope, from the Tomales Post Office to New York."<sup>8</sup> Kaltenbach recalled that he asked Esman "to choose an industrial designer to redesign the *Slant Step* to enhance its consumer appeal. My artistic motive was to cause the existence of an object [for] which I had no part in its appearance, reducing to zero the artist's aesthetic involvement. I kept this non-involvement as pure as possible.... I never saw [the] design until the steps were made."<sup>9</sup>

Esman found William Plumb, a renowned industrial designer who had begun his career with Gio Ponti in Milan and been involved with IBM's corporate and product design in the 1960s. He remembered:

I know I had it at one time to examine it. We agreed that the new object should have all of the "functional" characteristics of the original, what they actually were was a mystery, of course—but one could figure out that it was a footrest of some kind with a slanted "ramp" for resting one's feet. My designers and I determined the rough dimensions of the object by measuring the original and did preliminary sketches of how it might be made in a mold, allowing for easy removal, and with an exterior configuration and finish that would be pleasing to the eye. My shop made a solid plaster model and from that we made a mold from fiberglass and from this we made several prototypes until we had one that pleased all the participants and that could be molded in enough copies to make the desired series.<sup>10</sup>

Kaltenbach did indeed give the *Slant Step* a New York spin, turning a rough readymade into an object for mass production (fig. 12). While it was intended as an edition of seventy-five, only eighteen were produced, six in each of three colors. The original was then mailed by Kaltenbach to Phil Weidman, a student of Frank Owen's and the future compiler of *Slant Step Book*, in Sacramento, wrapped in butcher paper and filament tape. Back in California, Kaltenbach's step was filmed being drummed upon by Wiley and Robert Nelson in 1971, as though the idea couldn't escape its communal, funky origins. The original *Slant Step* was exhibited, examined, and changed hands a few times until Wayne Campbell again brought it to New York in 1973. In 1974 it took up residence in Owen's loft.

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stand, and unspool big rolls of paper on which Owen had written phrases like “drawn across,” “drawn tight,” and “drawn and weary.” Students were to draw the *Slant Step* as modified by these phrases. Owen lived in New York until 1981; when Nauman would come through town he would sometimes stay at Owen’s loft and say “hi” to the object.

Many have asked about the *Slant Step*’s impact in New York. In the truest sense, there was none. In a broader sense, there is, in that Nauman and Serra exerted a tremendous influence on the idea of the object, Conceptual art, etc., in New York. And if you were keenly interested in art in the 1960s, you would have read about it somewhere along the way.

But the *Slant Step* is essentially a narrative object. Narrative and prankishness were simply not part of the New York conversation in the 1970s. Certainly those things existed, but they were siloed off into individual galleries: Allan Frumkin for the Northern Californians and Phyllis Kind for the Chicagoans. The *Slant Step* and the community it embodied were not “part of the conversation” that we think of: *Avalanche*, *Art-Rite*, *Artforum*, and all that. This, it seems to me, is a shame. But it also depends on how you take Duchamp. Wiley and others took Duchamp as essentially permission giving and positive, in the material sense as well as the spirit of humor and nose thumbing. New Yorkers tended to take Duchamp as an ending and a ground clearing; he pointed to the dematerialization of the art object, the idea that philosophy can constitute art, and the elimination of subjectivity. In New York the readymade was an object of indifference, not action. The *Slant Step* has a life—a metaphysics—that runs counter to the entire conceptual and NYC art project.

As Joel Shapiro notes, “That kind of narrative didn’t seem necessary, and we were dealing with necessities. New York was a shithole, and we were worried about Vietnam.”<sup>11</sup> People were more involved with Judd and Morris—there wasn’t room for this kind of narrative. Which is not to say that Shapiro didn’t appreciate it. He remembers seeing it in Owen’s loft on Broadway. The two men had kids the same age and would visit each other. It was not sitting out but was something Owen offered to show him, and so he took a look. “It is a sexy object,” said Shapiro, “its flat back is perpendicular to the floor, and it has a nice organic curve. It’s an enigmatic readymade.” The *Slant Step* facilitated this interaction, as it did so many others, but that word of Shapiro’s—enigmatic—would prove to be the veil that hid it in those years. “For your purposes,” Owen wrote to me, “it is as if the shy object spent a decade in a small town in Iowa.”<sup>12</sup> And so it did. But on its way there, the *Slant Step* told its own stories, assembling layers of terra like the great unknown planet it remains.

## SLANT STEP BY STEP LESSONS

Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

*For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. —Edouard Glissant<sup>1</sup>*

By now you've heard something about it. You've probably seen what it looks like; you have an image in your head. You may have first encountered it glancingly years ago and since lost track of it, forgetting its existence and foggy when reminded. By now you have some idea of what it is, and that approximate idea may be as good as anyone's when it comes to a thing as evasive as this one. It may have lodged itself askew in the folds of your brain like a tiny burr, fixed in place by the lures of its attractive unknowns. This is how it circulates. For a long time, the *Slant Step* has operated and survived in this way—as hook, story, figment, tall tale, local legend, word of mouth, fiction, fetish, mascot, cult symbol, subcultural code, Trojan horse, insider knowledge. Whatever else you may have heard or read, you will also have gathered that enigma, instability, intrigue, and oddity are the basis of its currency and the main reason for its continuing relevance. That the *Slant Step* frustrates natural impulses to grasp essences and comprehend definitively is also its great promise and gift. It is the crooked shape of impediment and slippage, bent like a question mark. It is the silent, open, blank face of ambiguity. The inert embodiment of a peculiar mystique. At its core, the *Slant Step* is a thing of deep uncertainty, and that's what makes it matter.

Over the years it has been called things like “talismanic” and a “funky totem”<sup>2</sup> by critics and art historians, as though ritualistically endowed with spiritual power over its followers. Quixotic and cryptic, the step quickly acquired something of a celebrity status, parlaying curiosity into seduction. Bay Area artists championed the *Slant Step*, riffing on its strange shape in a great many individual works and group exhibitions, and turned it into a carrier of rumor, romance, comedy, and the interpersonal relationships of a scene's history. Expanding circles of friends and peers amused themselves with playful formal responses, passing the provocation of the step around like a talking stick. William T. Wiley, for example, and many of his slant-stepping peers, had an affinity for embellished narrative contexts for objects, the more dramatic and eccentric the better, spinning yarns and shaggy dog tales around the *Slant Step* to bring it to life and intellectualize

it as a character imbued with imagined agency. Far-fetched fictive biographical tales have been told over the years about this bastard stepchild: that it worked as a bouncer at a brothel on New York's Upper East Side or washed dishes at a Taco Bell or attended some made-up ball in Omaha. At the same time, maneuvering an object through the (art) world to function primarily in terms of the speculation and rumor it triggers was also a sneaky tactic being used effectively and more broadly by several Conceptual artists, like Bruce Nauman and Stephen Kaltenbach, who responded to the *Slant Step* in their work.

The artist Frank Owen, who studied at the University of California, Davis, under Wiley and others at the same time as Nauman and held the *Slant Step* in his possession for around forty years, used it "as a pedagogical tool to demonstrate to art students the notion that what is most important in art is determined by artists and nobody else."<sup>3</sup> In fact, the *Slant Step* seemed to encapsulate his entire teaching philosophy, as Owen used it as a classroom prompt and subject on the very first and very last day of his very long teaching career.

Turns out, the *Slant Step* still has lessons to teach.

#### TAKE A SUGGESTIVE POSTURE

The idea here, as described by Knute Stiles in *Artforum* in 1966, is to be "so ambiguous as to be infinitely suggestive."<sup>4</sup> I had been told the story of the *Slant Step* numerous times and by several people over the years. Yet somehow it wouldn't stick, facts kept sliding off its slope to lay in a jumble at its foot. It took the repetition of reading a dozen accounts of its oft-cited genesis before salient points began to take hold. As the story goes,<sup>5</sup> Wiley first found it in 1965 in a Mill Valley thrift store and bought it (for 50 cents) for his student Nauman. It went to Nauman's studio, where it instigated an unfinished film and numerous spin-off works. When artist and poet Phil Weidman saw the step in Nauman's studio, he didn't know what it was; no one knew what it was. He was "mystified," and being mystified left a deep impression: "Couldn't get the thing out of my head."

The first *Slant Step Show* opened at the Berkeley Gallery in 1966. At the end of the show's run, Richard Serra stole the *Slant Step* and took it to New York City. Curator Audrey Sabol took it from Serra's studio to Philadelphia; collectors Malcolm and Judith Weintraub took it from Sabol back to Sacramento. Some months later, the Weintraubs returned it to Nauman in San Francisco, who soon after left it at Bill Yates's house in Bolinas. In 1969 Weidman put together *Slant Step Book* in Sacramento, and Kaltenbach, in



New York, oversaw an industrially designed consumer edition (see fig. 12). In the years that followed, the *Slant Step* moved around and spent more time in New York, mostly with Owen. In 2012 he donated it to UC Davis.

This somewhat rickety armature of events doesn't give me a real handle on why the *Slant Step* ever mattered and mystified, and why we're still talking about it. Like the prop in a magician's act, it changed hands numerous times, disappearing and reappearing with surprising effects. Its trajectory has been convoluted, confusing, and riddled with holes as though deliberately rejecting directness and stability as against its nature—at odds with the very structure and design of its handmade slipperiness, its slide and slant.

Rather the power and strength of this thing is entirely congruent with the angle of its apparent deficiencies and weaknesses, its instability and difficulty, its ambiguity and provocation. From its first documented sighting, the *Slant Step*'s evident refusal to be known and understood was precisely what made it appear as something of interest. On a basic level, we still do not know who made it or when it was designed and constructed. We do not know what purpose it was made to serve, though possibilities abound and some claim to know its intended function. Its story and significance in art history begin where its legibility ends. Its creative promise extends from what is unassimilable, unresolvable, inappropriable—and inappropriate—in its form. Its very existence promises the sudden and miraculous appearance of unanticipated alternatives.

#### WHY BE ONE THING WHEN YOU CAN BE MANY

Speculative functions and interpretations of the form multiply, weaving together literal, actual-size use and figurative representation. Among the many things it suggests are a diving board or racing block—a jumping off point. Or a ski slope, acceleration runway, or tiny skate ramp—a thing for building momentum, speed. Or a doorstop, bookend, weight, block, barrier—an obstruction and obstacle. Or, relatedly, a squatty potty to aid in ergonomic defecation, as poet William Witherrup, who organized the 1966 *Slant Step Show*, has confidently claimed it was originally designed to serve as. Or a child's chair or very short slide, just long enough to make you fall on your ass—a physical as well as ontological prank and piece of prop comedy not without its neck-breaking or pain-in-the-ass risks. (See Wiley's *Slant Step Becomes Rhino/Rhino Becomes Slant Step* of 1966; fig. 6). Or, turning yourself around, it could be a knee rest for kneeling, like a pew.

## VISIBILITY, OPACITY, AND RECOGNITION COMPOUND IN UNEXPECTED WAYS

The *Slant Step* felt gripping and important to those who could see it because it was barely even visible. It was an overlooked, lowly thing at the thrift store where Wiley found it. It wasn't even intended for sale. By all accounts, it was just sort of lying around on the periphery of things, surviving through benign neglect (ever the artist's best friend). It was as if its presence was an oversight, an accident. The storekeepers were unsure of its purpose and didn't know what to charge for it when Wiley expressed interest. Its marginality attracted empathic attention and elicited the affections of those bleeding hearts inclined to root for the underdog. Its formal and material strangeness, the generative curiosity surrounding its indeterminate function, and its haggard misfit appearance are all reasons it eventually rose from certain obscurity to gain relative widespread visibility.

The tilt that queers its otherwise common, familiar form makes it both more accessible and more mysterious. Drawing its inspiration into our contemporary context, Gordon Hall has written thoughtfully about what the *Slant Step* can mean for us today: "Slowness to assign identification in the moment of encounter lies at the heart of the slant step's curious appeal." When recognition and identification are defamiliarized and postponed, it becomes possible to perceive difference as expansive and instructive rather than alienating and divisive. As Hall put it, Wiley perceived how well the step—despite the ambiguousness of its intended use—functions as "the object of certain recuperations. To treat a discarded object with care, to focus on it, show it to others, make copies and homages to it—to, in a sense, treat it with love—had a value for [Wiley] on its own account. A small act of treating an uncared-for thing with care as an articulation of an ethos for encountering one another."<sup>6</sup>

Inscrutability, unidentifiability, and ambiguity need some love, especially in a time of antagonistic identity politics and modern tribalisms where non-binary thinking clashes with aggressively regressive nationalisms. When Edouard Glissant, the astute theorizer of difference who wrote through a lens of race and colonialism, said that "a racist is someone who refuses what he doesn't understand. I can accept what I do not know,"<sup>7</sup> he was arguing for more than the mere "right to difference."<sup>8</sup> Glissant argued further for "the right to opacity that is ... subsistence within an irreducible singularity" because autonomy depends on the integrity of self in its entirety, including internal complexities and unknowns. Described by Glissant as "that which cannot be reduced," opacity is an expression of self-determination and "the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms."<sup>9</sup>

It is the basis for an entire worldview built not only on an affirmative claim for difference and unknowability in relations between peoples, but also the liberating potential of discovering opacities within ourselves and from which we can grow in unpredictable ways: "It does not disturb me to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it."<sup>10</sup>

This opacity might occupy the scene of the unconscious within the self, but constructing a subject position around such not-knowing is also a way of practicing radical openness to the world and receiving its unfathomable variety. Glissant sought to decouple the capacity for sympathetic relations from kinship and even understanding: "To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him."<sup>11</sup> Less theorized is the reflective, narcissistic flip side of Glissant's right to opacity in which viewers exercise rampant projection over perceived blankness, enabling many to see whatever they want in a thing like the *Slant Step* and, in fact, encouraging individuals to see in it some version of themselves.

## ECONOMICS ARE ETHICS

Taking a polemical pose that models ideals of social justice, the *Slant Step* bridges economic precarity with ethical conviction. As a found, ready-made sculpture, it posits an accessible, affordable, and even accidental art for anyone and everyone. More than just ready-made, it was "a sort of de-facto sculpture"<sup>12</sup> in that, lacking obvious utility, formal and aesthetic purpose came to describe its identity above other considerations. Its enduring resonance within an art context insists that having a transcendent, sublime, and transformative encounter with all the banal, unglorified objects passing through daily life is a matter of perceptual awareness more than a consequence of privilege or authority. The extraordinary resides in the ordinary, available to anyone. Being handmade, one-of-a-kind, damaged, used, cheap, and unauthored gives it a countercultural edge, conversant with both hippie and punk DIY approaches to craft that run against the grain of mainstream capitalist consumption, mass production, and certainly against the art market's obsession with gilded monuments, multinational galleries, and record-setting auction sales. In a word, it is against capital. It is a lowly, base, profane, dirty thing—urinal-like. In a 1966 issue of *Art International*, artist, critic, and teacher Fred Martin remarked that "the sport and joy of the *Slant Step* Show are only possible on a serious scale in a scene without sales—where artists care more for the act of art, its implications and works, than for the management of market roads to fame and fortune."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, many artists who first responded to the *Slant Step* seem to portray it as a patron saint of creators with limited means. Humble

appearance and diminutive scale end up producing outsized, enduring impact, and iconic stature.

## PERMISSION TO FAIL, NOT KNOW, AND BE INAPPROPRIATE

What do we learn when the “wrong” thing, the “off” thing, the mistake is right, best, and most interesting? What do we learn from a difficult, unruly, disobedient, and defiant object? From failed, futile, and impossible things—things that are aspirational, fantastical, and dreamed of—or things that are hated, disdained, and shunned? What do we learn from misunderstood things and things made specifically to frustrate routines of understanding? Is dysfunction just a problem of limited imagination? What’s to be done with inappropriate, crude, vulgar, dumb, and embarrassing bodies? How does an object transition from functional design item to art hero?

By withholding its purpose, this would-be utilitarian object suspends its potential as permanently up for debate. Further, it seems opposed to legible functionality on principle and represents the extremely generative and productive failure of antifunctionality. The artists who chose to respond to it in the 1960s (predominantly male, predominantly white, and often overlapping with so-called Funk art) prioritized puns, gags, ironic jokes, goofiness, irreverence, absurdity, and pranks. They tended to prize elements of surprise, and humor is their favorite route to the defamiliarization vital to seeing things anew. For them, in Jessica Brier’s words, “it represented the radical possibilities of where an artwork might begin and the kinds of subjects that were appropriate for art making.”<sup>14</sup> Or as Owen put it, “I always have seen it as a San Francisco version of a Bronx cheer to all of the theoretical folk—raising the point that art is what artists make, not what theoreticians say you should make. If we want to make art about this stupid, humble, little, green linoleum object, why, we’ll do it.”<sup>15</sup>

Terry Berlier

Born 1972, Cincinnati, OH  
Lives in Moss Beach, CA

Berlier learned about the *Slant Step* while pursuing an MFA at the University of California, Davis. She introduces the object in her classes at Stanford University, where she is an associate professor and director of the Sculpture Lab. Her multimedia sculptures and installations excavate common objects to reveal their role within the construction of history and identity. Berlier has had solo exhibitions at Contemporary Art and Spirits, Osaka; San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art; and Babel Art Gallery, Trondheim, Norway, among other venues. She has been in group shows at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco and FemArt in Barcelona.

*Interruption*, 2019. Pencil on paper,  
13 × 9 in. (33 × 22.9 cm).



Gordon Hall

Born 1983, Boston, MA

Lives in Brooklyn, NY

Hall's performances, sculptures, and writings examine the different ways in which objects can guide us in understanding and experiencing our bodies. Hall holds an MFA and an MA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and has had solo exhibitions at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Portland, OR; the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA; and the Renaissance Society, Chicago, among other venues. Hall has been included in group exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Hall's writings and interviews have been featured in a variety of publications including *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Randy*, *Documents of Contemporary Art: Queer* (published by Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2016), and *Theorizing Visual Studies* (Routledge, 2012).

Excerpt from "Reading Things," an essay commissioned by *Walker Reader* for the Walker Art Center's Artist Op-Ed Series, August 8, 2016, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/gordon-hall-transgender-hb2-bathroom-bill>.

## Slant Stepping: An Introduction

Francesca Wilmott

1. Frank Owen and Phil Weidman, "Bruce Nauman Interview," in Phil Weidman, *Slant Step Book* (Sacramento: The Art Company, 1969), 6–8.
2. Cynthia Charters, "The *Slant Step* Saga," in *The "Slant Step" Revisited*, ed. Cynthia Charters and Price Amerson (Davis: University of California, Davis, Richard L. Nelson Gallery, 1983), 9–15. Unless otherwise noted, the activities surrounding the *Slant Step* between 1965 and 1982 as described in this text are drawn from Charters's chronology.
3. Since 1965 the *Slant Step* has resided for periods in Mill Valley, CA; Davis, CA; San Francisco; Bolinas, CA; Sacramento; New York; Philadelphia; Burlington, VT; Richmond, VA; and Chapel Hill, NC, before returning to UC Davis in 2012.
4. My sincere thanks to Jo Applin, Reader in the History of Art and Head of History of Art Department, at The Courtauld Institute of Art, for her unerring guidance and gracious feedback on this text. I also express heartfelt gratitude to James Stanley for his encouragement with this project.
5. Jerome Tarshis, "The National Scene: San Francisco—Huckleberry Duchamp," *ARTnews* 73, no. 5 (May 1974): 49. In 1971 Hilton Kramer called William T. Wiley a leader of "Dude Ranch Dada": Hilton Kramer, "Art," *New York Times*, May 16, 1971.
6. Grace Glueck, "Art Notes: The *Slant Step*," *New York Times*, June 2, 1968.
7. The imagery of the *Slant Step* as a vessel is further supported by William T. Wiley's insertion of Excedrin tablets within a notch cut into the lead surface of his 1966 version and William Allan's 1966 watercolor series, in which a floating step has sprung a leak.
8. In her fall 1966 exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction* at New York's Fischbach Gallery, Lucy Lippard recognized the "raunchy, cynical eroticism" of West Coast artists who were "more involved with assemblage" than with the "structural frameworks" of New York Minimalism. In the show, Lippard included the work of Nauman—only several months out of UC Davis—alongside that of more established East Coast artists. She workshopped her ideas at UC Berkeley in the summer of 1966, around the same time the September 1966 Berkeley Gallery *Slant Step Show* was coming together. "Eccentric Abstraction" in Lucy Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: Dutton, 1971), 108.
9. John Fitz Gibbon, "Sacramento!" *Art in America* 59, no. 6 (December 1971): 80.
10. Anne M. Wagner, "Nauman's Body of Sculpture," *October* 120 (2007): 61, 70.
11. Wagner, "Nauman's Body of Sculpture," 67.
12. In a 2009 email to Peter Plagens, William Witherup stated that "this footstool ... though we did not know this at the time—was for people to use to put their feet up on when they were having trouble taking a shit!" Peter Plagens, *Bruce Nauman: The True Artist* (London: Phaidon, 2014), 42. While Witherup's theory has been embraced by many, it also has a number of skeptics among first-generation *Slant Step* artists.
13. In addition to the 1966 Berkeley Gallery show, *Slant Step*-related works cropped up in Peter Selz's 1967 *Funk* show at the University Art Museum at UC Berkeley; the 1969 *Repair Show* at Berkeley Gallery; the 1969 *Slant Step Book*; the 1970 *Slant Step Show* at the Art Company in Sacramento; presentations at the Candy Store Gallery in Folsom, CA, in the 1970s; and "*Slant Step*" *Revisited* book and exhibition in 1983, *Speaking Slant Step* in 2005, and *Flatlanders on the Slant* in 2012, all at UC Davis's Nelson Gallery; numerous gallery exhibitions in New York and Chicago between 2011 and 2019 focused on Kaltenbach; and *West by Midwest* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2018–19.
14. Charters, "*Slant Step* Saga," 10.
15. Joan Didion, "Notes from a Native Daughter" (1965), in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Essays* (1968; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 184.
16. In 1971 Fitz Gibbon remarked that artists in Sacramento were "working unnoticed, working without any but the exacting patronage of the colleges, working often (in default of other audiences) for each other." Fitz Gibbon, "Sacramento!" 80. The Center for Contemporary Art, Sacramento, founded in 1989, arose from this need for a dedicated contemporary art space; in 2014 it merged with Verge Center for the Arts.
17. Charters, "*Slant Step* Saga," 10.
18. Sarah Meller, "The Biennial and Women Artists: A Look Back At Feminist Protests At The Whitney," Whitney Museum of American Art website, May 3, 2010, <https://whitney.org/Education/EducationBlog/BiennialAndWomenArtists>. Sacramento State's Art Department demographics are not available for 1969; however, by 1974 a petition circulated to correct gender inequality noting "a ratio of three full-time women to 28 full-time men in the art department" and stating that there were "no women in the fine arts" faculty. Petition, June 9, 1974, in Carton 18, School of Arts and Sciences, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Library, California State University, Sacramento.



19. The *Slant Step* has been referred to as “Mr. Slant” by different artists over the years, including Jack Ogden in his 1969 collage *Mr. Slant’s Slope*. During the 1966 Berkeley Gallery show, James Melchert sang “I Wonder Who’s Slanting Her Now.” Charters, “*Slant Step* Saga,” 10.

20. The women represented in Dorothy Wiley’s photograph include Donna Geis, Jeanette Wiley, Louise Pryor, Diane Fulton, and Gunvor Nelson.

21. Charters, “*Slant Step* Saga,” 21.

22. Louise Pryor, in discussion with the author, March 3, 2019. Pryor’s sculpture has since been lost.

23. School of Visual Arts, New York; Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond; the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; and finally, the University of Vermont, Burlington.

24. Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Raleigh-Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1, 4. Thanks to the artists Terry Berlier and Angela Willetts, who initially brought the connection between the *Slant Step* and Ahmed’s approach to orientation to my attention.

25. Corin Hewitt’s father, Francis Hewitt, taught alongside Owen and occupied the same office at the University of Vermont, Burlington, prior to his death in 1992.

26. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 18.

27. Gordon Hall’s considerations of the *Slant Step* have been a driving force behind much of this exhibition. My special thanks to Gordon for being a continual source of knowledge and insight as this project came together. Gordon Hall, “Reading Things: Gordon Hall on Gender, Sculpture, and Relearning How to See,” *Sightlines*, Walker Art Center website, August 8, 2016, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/gordon-hall-transgender-hb2-bathroom-bill>.

### Slant Steps: An Abridged History

Jacob Stewart-Halevy

1. Cynthia Charters, “The *Slant Step* Saga,” in *The “Slant Step” Revisited*, ed. Cynthia Charters and Price Amerson (Davis: University of California, Davis, Richard L. Nelson Gallery, 1983), 9.

2. Nauman and Allan’s film was never finished and has subsequently gone missing. It has been described both as a film about the origins of the *Slant Step*—as in Nauman’s contribution to Phil Weidman, *Slant Step Book* (Sacramento: The Art Company, 1969), 7—and as a kind of “shop film” that took the form of an instructional guide on how to build further slanted

steps (see Constance Lewallen, *A Rose Has No Teeth: Bruce Nauman in the 1960s* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007], 12). Nauman also discussed it in Michele de Angelus, “Interview with Bruce Nauman, May 27 and 30, 1980,” in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman’s Words*, by Bruce Nauman, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 197–296. Their film went unfinished—they never applied the linoleum to the wooden prop—but its premise and aesthetic loosely resembled that of their other “how-to” collaboration: *Abstracting the Shoe* (1965), in which the two take a dark, viscous substance and shape it into a model of the shoe that stands next to it.

3. Wiley has discussed his mid-1960s interest in the Surrealists’ use of mystery, enigma, and the marvelous. See William T. Wiley, interview by Paul J. Karlstrom, October 8–November 20, 1997, Woodacre, CA, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-william-t-wiley-12900>. The term “ethnographic Surrealism” comes from James Clifford’s influential essay, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 23, no. 4 (October 1981): 539–64, where he explores the intersection between art and anthropology in the Parisian avant-gardes.

4. James Melchert, email to the author, March 17, 2017.

5. As might be expected of any legend, there are numerous disparities in the relating of the odyssey of the *Slant Step*. It is described, *inter alia*, in fragments in Wiley, interview by Karlstrom; and in Joann Moser, *What’s It All Mean: William T. Wiley in Retrospect* (Washington DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 55–57; Lewallen, *A Rose Has No Teeth*, 112n65; Neal Benezra, Kathy Halbreich, Joan Simon, and Paul Schimmel, *Bruce Nauman: Exhibition and Catalogue Raisonné* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1994), 203; Weidman, *Slant Step Book*; and Charters and Amerson, “*Slant Step*” *Revisited*.

6. Cited in Weidman, *Slant Step Book*, 8.

7. The original song, “I Wonder Who’s Kissing Her Now,” written in 1909 by Harold Orlob, Will M. Hough, Frank R. Adams, was performed by numerous entertainers, including Perry Como, Ray Charles, and Dean Martin. In 1947 it inspired a popular film in which the songwriter’s lyrics are stolen; it may have served as a handy allegory for the artists’ loose approach to intellectual property.

8. Alfred Frankenstein, “Dada Game Revised,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 17, 1966.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Ray Johnson's "conceptual" *Slant Step Proposal* read: "Mail to Ray Johnson a pair of newly-purchased cellophane-wrapped jockey shorts, size 32 waist and he will mail to you a pair of used, tattered, fragrant shorts, not possibly Jockey trademark." See Weidman, *Slant Step Book*, 23.

11. Weidman quoted in Charters and Amerson, "*Slant Step*" *Revisited*, 10.

12. Ron Peetz, in discussion with the author, February, 20, 2018.

13. Phil Weidman, in discussion with the author, March 5, 2018.

14. While Johnson was visiting Sacramento State, Weidman made a version of Johnson's early work *Paper Snake* using lottery tickets instead of notes and letters, and the class made black-painted wooden triangles, "a kind of dull musical instrument," to introduce him. Phil Weidman, in discussion with the author, March 8, 2018.

15. Arneson, having contributed an earthenware step to *The Slant Step Show* with the inscription "Old Chinese Proverb," this time made *Blueprint for a Slant Step* (fig. 13), a ceramic sculpture in the shape of the step embedded with a footprint and glazed in a semitranslucent blue reminiscent of maps of the cosmos. Other artists in the show relied heavily on wordplay: Michael Steven's sculpture of a hairy waxen snout took the pig latin title *Lantsay Tepsay*, while James Melchert tried to clarify the distinction between the original *Slant Step* and his earlier *Anti-Slant Step* (fig. 7) with *Five Things You Can Do with Your Slant Step/Five Things You Can Do with Your Anti-Slant Step*, a series of Dadaist anagrams (fig. 8).

16. Over the past decade, UC Davis has staged the *Slant Step*-related exhibitions *Speaking Slant Step* (2006) and *Flatlanders on the Slant* (2012). Promotional material for the latter said, "Hundreds of artists have made their own versions of the *Slant Step* over the years, and for this exhibition, 50 artists will present new *Slant Step*-inspired works. The original will be on view as well." See "Nelson Gallery Looks at Flatlanders on the Slant," *Davis Enterprise*, July 6, 2012. The *Slant Step* was included in the 2016 exhibition *Out Our Way* celebrating the opening of the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis. In his review of the exhibition, Charles Desmarais, the *San Francisco Chronicle*'s art critic, instructed his readers to "leave time to fully appreciate a kind of sub-exhibition, 'Community of Exchange,' presenting small works and ephemera that tell the story of artists at Davis teaching, exhibiting and making together. Here is told the story of 'The Slant Step'—the humblest, and certainly the most famous, object in the entire exhibition." Charles Desmarais, "UC Davis' new Shrem Museum of Art still finding its

feet," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 13, 2016, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/news/article/UC-Davis-Shrem-Museum-of-Art-opens-still-10608884.php>.

17. Stephen Kaltenbach and David E. Stone, "How to Make a Slant Step (Short Version)," YouTube video, posted by David Stone, November 8, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eT5VGiyh8nI>.

18. Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1998), 23.

## Enchanted and Slanted

Dan Nadel

1. Cynthia Charters, "The *Slant Step* Saga," in *The Slant Step Revisited*, ed. Cynthia Charters and Price Amerson (Davis: University of California, Davis, Richard L. Nelson Gallery, 1983), 9–15.

2. Marina Pacini, "Who but the Arts Council," *Archives of American Art Journal* 27, no. 4 (1987): 9–23.

3. Joan Kron Papers, 1959–1971, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/items/detail/four-people-outside-roy-lichtensteins-billboard-super-sunset-1840>.

4. Joan Kron, interview by Sid Sachs, *Invisible City: Philadelphia and the Vernacular Avant-Garde* website, 2015, <https://invisiblecity.uarts.edu/uploads/files/104780161752351899-joankron-finalaudiotranscript.pdf>.

5. Malcolm Weintraub, in discussion with the author, February 8, 2019. All quotes and memories of Malcolm Weintraub are from this discussion.

6. Charters, "*Slant Step* Saga," 12.

7. Stephen Kaltenbach, in discussion with the author, January 29, 2019.

8. Charters, "*Slant Step* Saga," 11.

9. Stephen Kaltenbach quoted in "Stephen Kaltenbach: slantstep 2," Specific Object / David Platzker website, 2011, [https://specificobject.com/projects/slantstep/index.cfm?project\\_id=42#.XGxsq6fMwy8](https://specificobject.com/projects/slantstep/index.cfm?project_id=42#.XGxsq6fMwy8).

10. William Plumb quoted in "Stephen Kaltenbach: slantstep 2."

11. Joel Shapiro, in discussion with the author, February 6, 2019.

12. Frank Owen, e-mail to the author, February 7, 2019.

## Slant Step by Step Lessons

Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

1. Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 190.

2. Christopher Knight, "Has Art's Slant Step Mystery Finally Been Solved?" *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-slant-step-mystery-solved-20140609-column.html>.

3. Owen quoted in Cynthia Charters and Price Amerson, eds., *The "Slant Step" Revisited* (Davis: University of California, Davis, Richard L. Nelson Gallery, 1983), 14.

4. Knute Stiles, "San Francisco: William Geis and Bruce Nauman," *Artforum* 5, no. 4 (December 1966): 65-66.

5. Cynthia Charters, "The Slant Step Saga," in Charters and Amerson, *"Slant Step" Revisited*, 9-15.

6. Gordon Hall, "Reading Things: Gordon Hall on Gender, Sculpture, and Relearning How to See," *Sightlines*, Walker Art Center website, August 8, 2016: <https://walkerart.org/magazine/gordon-hall-transgender-hb2-bathroom-bill>.

7. Edouard Glissant quoted in Ulrich Loock, "Opacity" *Frieze*, November 7, 2012, [frieze.com/article/opacity](http://frieze.com/article/opacity).

8. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

9. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190-91.

10. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 192.

11. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 193.

12. Jessica Brier, "The Linoleum Symbol of a New and Coming Faith," *Art Practical*, September 11, 2013, <https://www.artpractical.com/feature/the-linoleum-symbol-of-a-new-and-coming-faith/>.

13. Fred Martin quoted in James Monte, "'Making It' with Funk," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967): 58.

14. Brier, "Linoleum Symbol."

15. Frank Owen, interviewed by Thomas Weaver in "A Certain Slant: Teaching Prop Has a Rich History," *UVM Today*, University of Vermont website, December 8, 2010, <https://www.uvm.edu/uvmnews/news/certain-slant>.

## Reading Things

Gordon Hall

1. Since writing this essay, North Carolina's House Bill 2 was partially repealed after massive protests and boycotts on the part of individuals, organizations, politicians, and perhaps most important, corporations. Governor Pat McCrory lost his bid for re-election to Roy Cooper, who oversaw a reversal of the aspects of the law pertaining to public restrooms. This partial repeal of the bill kept in place the sections of the bill that forbid local nondiscrimination ordinances that extend to sexuality and gender identity until 2020. When I wrote this piece in the summer of 2016, I was feeling optimistic about the future of transgender people in the United States. Now, in March of 2019, it is harder to feel hopeful. Since the election of Donald Trump there has been a large scale reversal of civil rights protections for gay and transgender people, most notably a Justice Department memo from 2017 that instructs its attorneys that federal law does not protect transgender workers from discrimination, a 2018 Department of Education announcement that it will dismiss all complaints from transgender students regarding exclusion from sex-segregated facilities, and the still-evolving ban on transgender people serving in the military. For a growing list, see the National Center for Transgender Equality's website, <https://transequality.org/the-discrimination-administration>.

2. This requirement is included in the law despite the fact that regulations governing the change of a sex marker on a birth certificate vary widely from state to state. In North Carolina, for example, such modifications are only allowed after the completion of sex-reassignment surgery, which many transgender people either cannot access or do not want.

3. Cited in Christopher Knight, "Has Art's Slant Step Mystery Finally Been Solved?" *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-slant-step-mystery-solved-20140609-column.html>; and in the blog post "Mystery of a 50-year-old Nauman art object solved" at Phaidon.com, June 11, 2014, <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2014/june/11/mystery-of-a-50-year-old-nauman-art-object-solved/>.

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P 63: Courtesy of Bridget Donahue Gallery. Photograph by Greg Carideo.

In 1965 the artist William T. Wiley found a mysterious slanted object in a Northern California salvage shop and gifted it to his student Bruce Nauman, setting off a series of artistic exchanges that continued for nearly five decades. What started as a California story soon became a national phenomenon, resulting in new works by artists such as Ray Johnson, Stephen Kaltenbach, Nauman, Richard Serra, and Wiley who were drawn to the enigma of the slanted green stool. Since the 1960s the *Slant Step* has developed a cultlike following and inspired innumerable sculptures, drawings, prints, photographs, films, poems, and an influential artists' book published by artist Phil Weidman in 1969. This long-overdue re-publication of the *Slant Step Book* features a facsimile of the 1969 artists' book and a companion collection of new essays and visual responses by contemporary writers and artists who extend the legacy of the *Slant Step* into our present moment.