

**Venice 2017**



**PERSONAL  
STRUCTURES  
Open Borders**

# Laura Shill & Joel Swanson

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*Personal Structures: Time, Space, Existence* explores the systems that confine, define, and organize us. In response to this overarching theme, Black Cube, a nomadic contemporary art museum based in Denver, presents two American artists, Laura Shill and Joel Swanson, both from Colorado. Shill and Swanson's installations consider the complexities of binary structures, challenging ideas of duality and gender, seeing opposing concepts as intertwined.

Laura Shill's *Trophy Wall (to disguise the void)* is a sculptural relief composed of second hand basket and soccer balls draped in gold fabric curtains. The installation presents the viewer with a façade of luxury supported by nothing more than cast-off sports equipment gathered from thrift stores. The balls, covered with slinky spandex, are suggestive of male body parts and the golden curtains glisten like a Las Vegas stage. The title suggests the male world of hunting, and also conjures up ideas of the trophy wife. Shill is interested in the fabric's use for performance; the material could easily be used by the sex industry or as a costume in a beauty pageant, and can also be seen as a symbol of the dichotomy within female sexuality as either pure or loose; looking luxurious from afar and cheap up close. *Trophy Wall* is part of a larger series of Shill's work examining the male and female gaze, reflecting on the objectification of desire.

Joel Swanson's installation is a semiotically playful neon sculpture of the word SHE. The 'S' flickers between HE and SHE settings, simultaneously acknowledging gender definitions and gender fluidity. The backwards 'S' in the work creates further ambiguity between the space of HE and SHE, suggesting an in-between space. Symbolic images, like this, compensate for language's shortcomings. The second neon in the exhibition, T/HERE, implies

that opposing ideas are one in the same. "There" is innately part of "here;" in other words, to have distance you must first have place. Both works take root in opposing concepts that are connected through language. Constructed in large neon letters, Swanson is interested in the associations with signage that the medium evokes. Neon has a close connection to American culture, as the U.S. was the first country to widely adopt neon as the epitome of glamour and Hollywood. However by the late 1940s, it was associated with the seediness of advertising and urban decay.

The dichotomy in these works represents an age-old pattern of how we perceive the world. Many cultures speak about the contrast between day and night, male and female, body and mind, and good and evil. Studies suggest that our tendency towards binary thinking is connected to basic survival instincts, fight or flight. The works in this exhibition go beyond the polarity of opposites by exploring the in-between spaces of gender norms and language.

*Trophy Wall (to disguise the void)* and S/HE are fundamentally reflective of the fear of "the other" that has recently surfaced within American politics. These works are statements about how our contemporary world is structured, from our language to our gaze. They question whether we are now at a tipping point to break open the definitions of gender and reconsider how we view difference.

THE

