

# SUSAN GILES

*Space Has Become This Material Thing*







## Susan Giles

### Space Has Become This Material Thing

September 6–October 28, 2023

*Space Has Become This Material Thing* reveals the intersections of memory, communication, and physicality. In this exhibition, Susan Giles translates hand gestures of individuals reflecting on their recent transition to new homes. The invited participants, young adults and elderly citizens, like many others, underwent significant changes in their perception of home during the pandemic-induced isolation. The stories and gestures captured through this artwork serve as a point of social engagement through listening, sharing, and connecting personal to collective memory.

The fleeting shapes and movements hands make while speaking are skillfully rendered, evoking the embodied experience of the world and making each artwork a tangible repository and preserving the recollections and realities of the speakers. In focusing on the recalled experiences of individuals and the corresponding hand gestures, Giles illuminates the point at which language takes on a sculptural form. Hung at “hand-gesture-height,” the work serves a reminder to the viewer of their own body and the gestural traces inherent in communication. The exhibition strikes a balance between the permanent and the transient, offering a captivating exploration of how our embodied experiences shape our understanding and representation of the spaces we call home.

#### **Glass Curtain Gallery**

1104 S Wabash Ave, 1st Floor, Chicago, IL 60605  
[colum.edu/deps](http://colum.edu/deps)



ILLINOIS  
ARTS  
COUNCIL  
AGENCY

**Columbia**  
COLLEGE CHICAGO

department of exhibitions,  
performance & student spaces

| **deps**





## Essay by Teresa Silva

The leading visual artist Susan Giles is known for her space-filling sculptures and ongoing exploration of memory. Giles also works in an expansive array of media – drawings, prints, photographs, and videos – to give shape to the contours and textures of memories as expressed through hand gestures. In her solo exhibition “Space Has Become This Material Thing,” she draws inspiration from individuals who described what home was to them during the isolation of a pandemic, translating their hand movements into object and image; giving a visual and material size and weight to memory.

Gesturing with your hands is at once deeply idiosyncratic and widely cultural. They are unwitting and intuitive movements that enhance the retelling of a personal account and how we interact and communicate them with others. Giles recognizes that they serve to activate the mind and move as such to tell a story that creates a mental sculpture. Giles is interested in how to capture the simultaneous presence and ephemerality of memories. Their form is fleeting, unmonumental, and considering that recollections are mutable, an intrinsic aspect of Giles’ new body of work is that no single medium can wholly capture a memory and no single gesture has the capacity to tell a story.

For “Space Has Become This Material Thing,” Giles invited young adults and elderly citizens to describe their perception of home during the upheaval and subsequent isolation of the pandemic. Like many others, the participants underwent significant changes in their view of home, and not solely because of a global health crisis but also because they were transitioning into new phases of their lives: the young adults were college-level students on the cusp of graduation, whereas the elderly recently moved into a retirement community. The young and elderly alike expressed shifting relationships to space and home and outlooks on their potentials and limitations.

For this project, Giles used a motion-detector camera to record the participants’ hand gestures and rendered them as digital drawings or as 3D prints that were laser-cut in cardboard. They are artistic analogues of gestures, propositions for diagrams of thinking, and repositories for memories. Giles manifests their visual aspects to create a space for self-reflection and connection with what resonates among the stories told.

In the gallery’s window, facing the street, reads in vinyl lettering, “Through the pandemic I was in the basement a lot. I just slept on the couch.” The remark made by Adele is accompanied by diagrams of accordion-like shapes, reflecting the moving and retracting of the individual’s hands in recounting a new reality that befell them during the pandemic. Inside the gallery, a sweeping honeycomb-like cardboard sculpture fills the center of the space, adhering and floating against a pillar. The sculpture’s title conveys the sentiment by another, “You know I just, like, accepted space as an ever-expanding, infinite, but now it’s so numbered and so fixed.... I feel like space has become this material thing. All of space is just, like, particles of COVID or something sick even after being vaccinated.... I feel I can only exist as an individual element in a network of people rather than just be a group of people.”

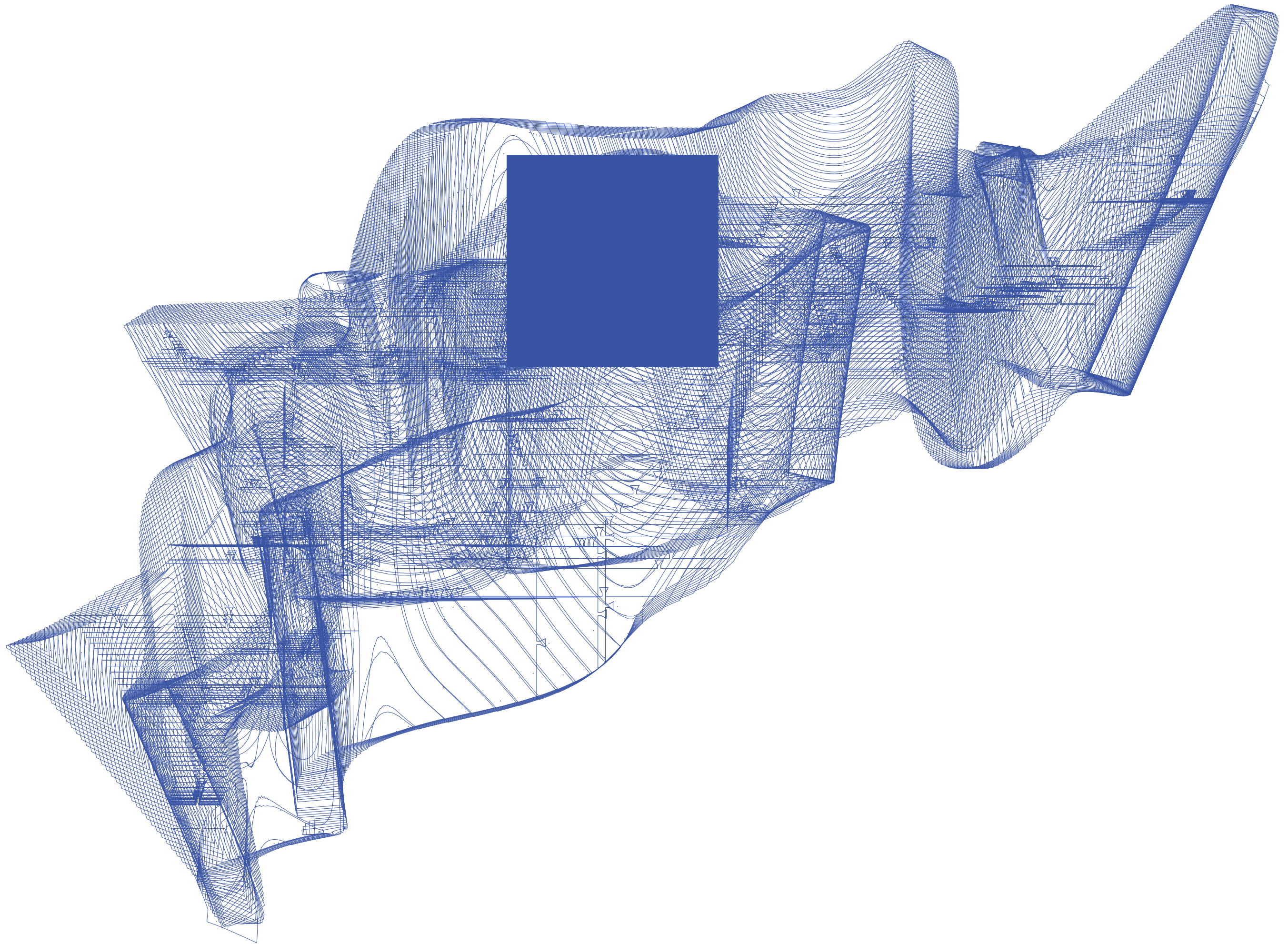
The sculpture gives physicality to a melancholic emotional state expressed by Anirudh but it also gives a gravity to the expansiveness of the virus in space.

One participant stood apart for their myriad hand gestures and that was Charles. Giles created twelve exquisite colored pencil drawings to highlight each moment of their physical inflections. The drawings hung at waist height to reflect back the approximate level that the storyteller was recounting how home has changed through their college days, married life, and to a retirement community. The drawings have a graphic identity, where color is used sparingly but powerfully to generate a visual language that pulsates and flows like the rhythm of life.

The subject has always mattered more to Giles than the process of generating the works of art. Memories are the starting point in an artistic line of inquiry to visualize gestures, language, and space at play; and, in so doing, trying to take the deeply personal of an individual and making it widely relatable to an audience. As an artist, Giles recognizes that memories are dimensional and that sculpture shares this condition of physicality and mutability. We know that memories change but that doesn’t make them untruthful. Just like each retelling of a memory will be different, each viewing encounter with the exhibition will be changed. If we accept this shifting as part of making meaning, we grasp that our own conception of home is influx in neither a positive or negative way. Memories change over time and in space, and by extension so has “home” for the participants in the exhibition.

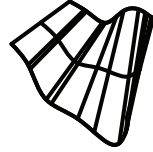
Through sculptures and drawings of hand gestures, Giles transforms memories into corporeal works that evoke contemplation and connection. With poetic minimalism and disarming details, she renders such stories into a physical presence in the gallery, turning personal accounts into collective memory of a period of time that re-defined us in relationship to space, home, ourselves, and one another.





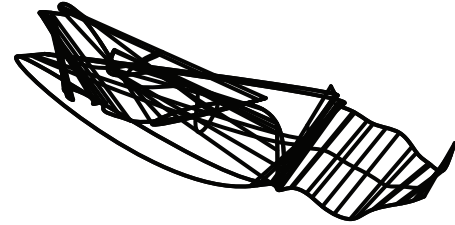


Through



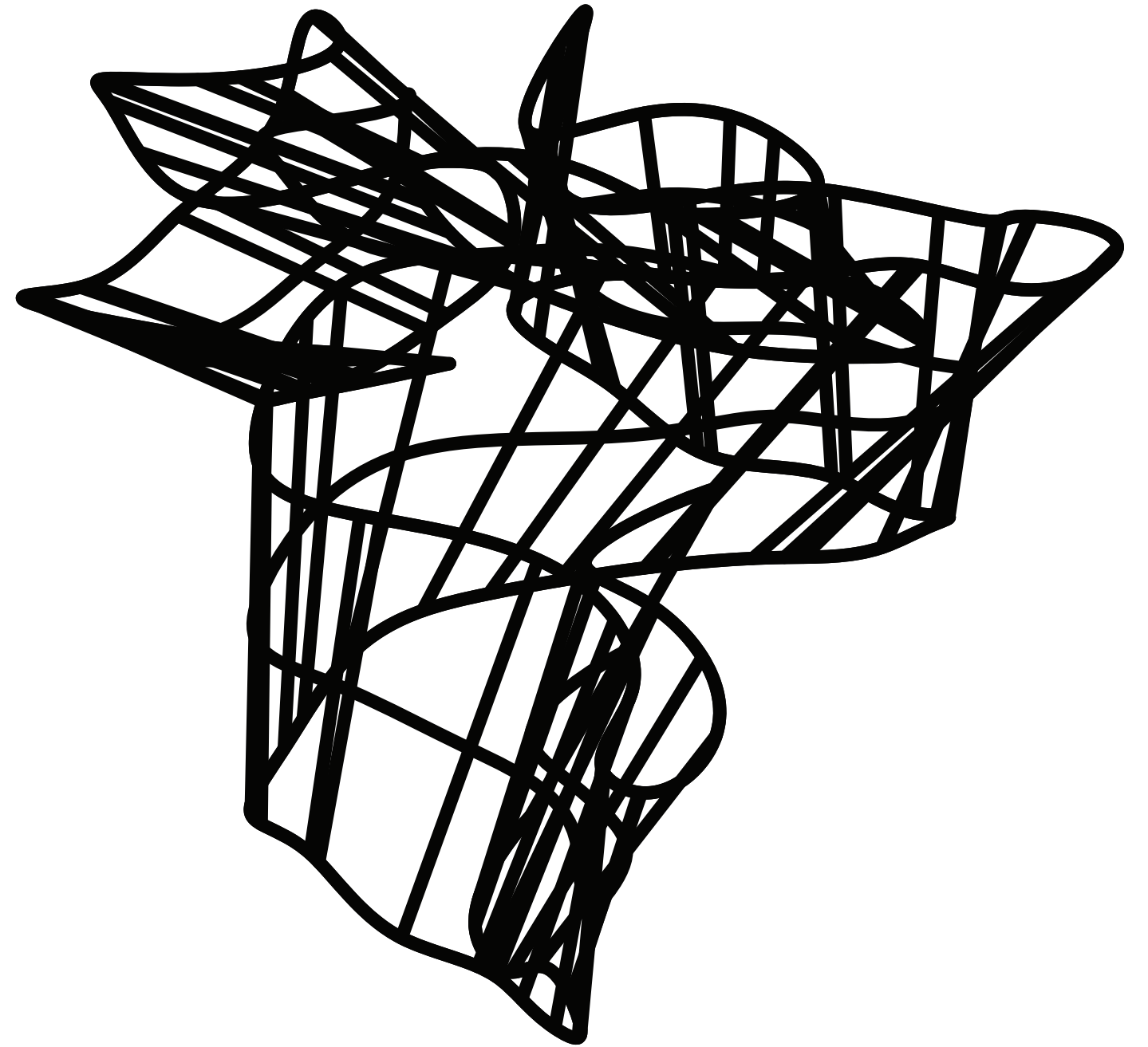
the pandemic I was

in the basement a lot. I just



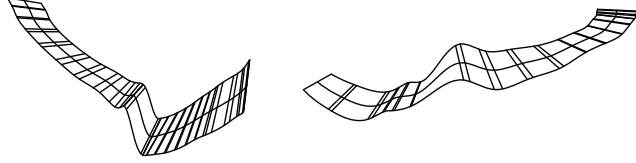
slept on

the couch.



You know I just, like, accepted space as ever-expanding, infinite, but now its so numbered and so fixed that everything just feels small and clausterphobic, like six feet is too small now. Its not that much of a

distance for me. I feel like space has become this



something sick



material thing. All of space is just, like,



particles of COVID or

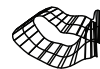
even after being vaccinated. A point of contact

been reduced to that. I feel I can only exist as an individual element in a network of people

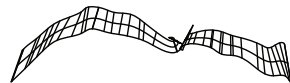


that is what I am. I feel I have

be



a group of people.



rather than just

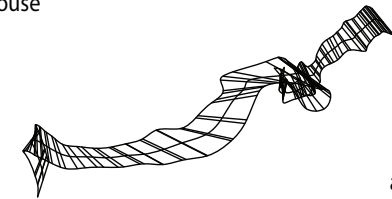
Anirudh

So I started paying attention to just, like, how I was walking around this house

room



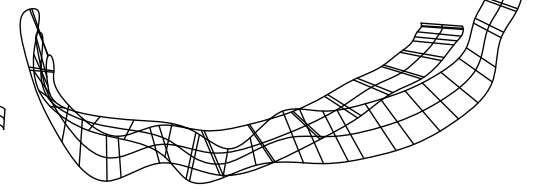
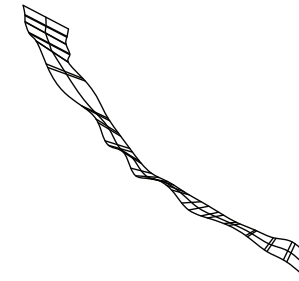
and, like, how that affects the way I think. Then when I moved



and how I was sitting in this one

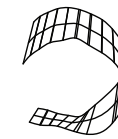
I was in my own space for the first time so I felt like I could just walk through

so I didn't have to close my door and try and



here and

you are in can literally be like the space inside of your head or, like, the other way around.



separate myself from everybody. The space

Jrah





*All of Space is Just, Like, Particles of COVID or Something Sick*, 2023, honeycomb cardboard







**Susan Giles**  
**Space Has Become This Material Thing**  
September 5–October 27, 2023

*Space Has Become This Material Thing* revisits the intersections of memory, communication, and physicality. In this exhibition Susan Giles translated hand gestures of individuals reflecting on their recent transition to new homes. The invited participants, young adults and elderly citizens, like many others, underwent significant changes in their perception of home during the pandemic-induced isolation. The stories and gestures captured through this artwork serve as a point of social engagement through listening, sharing, and connecting personal to collective memory.

The fleeting shapes and movements hands make while speaking have been skillfully rendered, evoking the embodied experience of the world and making each artwork a tangible repository and preserving the recollections and realities of the speakers. In focusing on the recalled experiences of individuals and the corresponding hand gestures, Giles illuminates the point at which language takes sculptural form. Hung at "hand-gesture-height," the work serves as a reminder to the viewer of their own body and the gestural traces inherent in communication. The exhibition strikes a balance between the permanent and the transient, offering a captivating exploration of how our embodied experiences shape our understanding and representation of the spaces we call home.

The artist would like to thank the participants in this project: Anirban Singh Shukla, Jan Jamin, Aida Hill, Sue Young, Barbara Henschel, Charles, Rex Moody, Su Parro, Judy Mills, Ann, Alan, Anil, and Steve Anderson.

This project is partially supported by an Individual Artist Program Grant from the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events, as well as a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency, a state agency through federal funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts. The project is also partially supported by the message Center in Putnam Co., Georgia. In the form of a 2022 artist residency.



**Gestural Traces and Material Memory (Charles), 2022, colored pencil on paper**



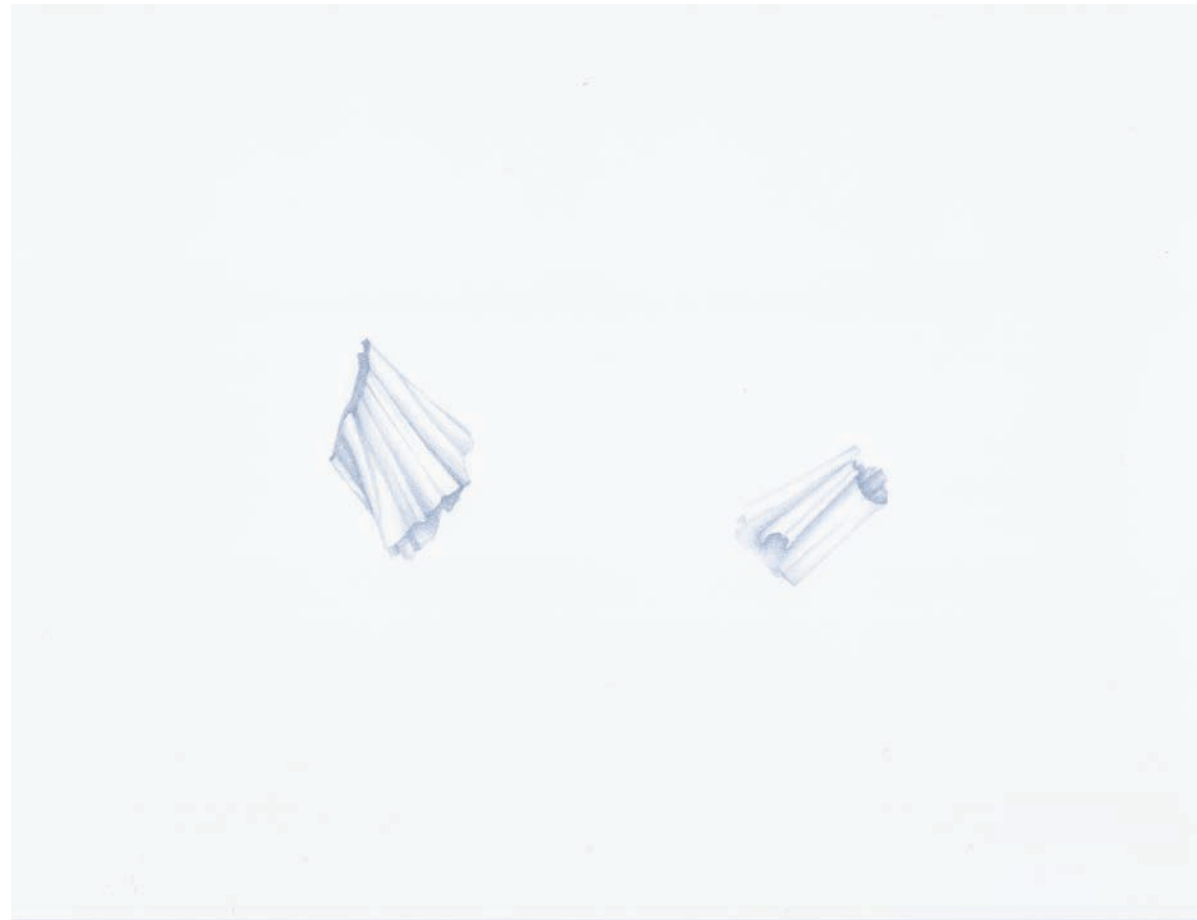


*Anirudh*, 2023, corrugated cardboard

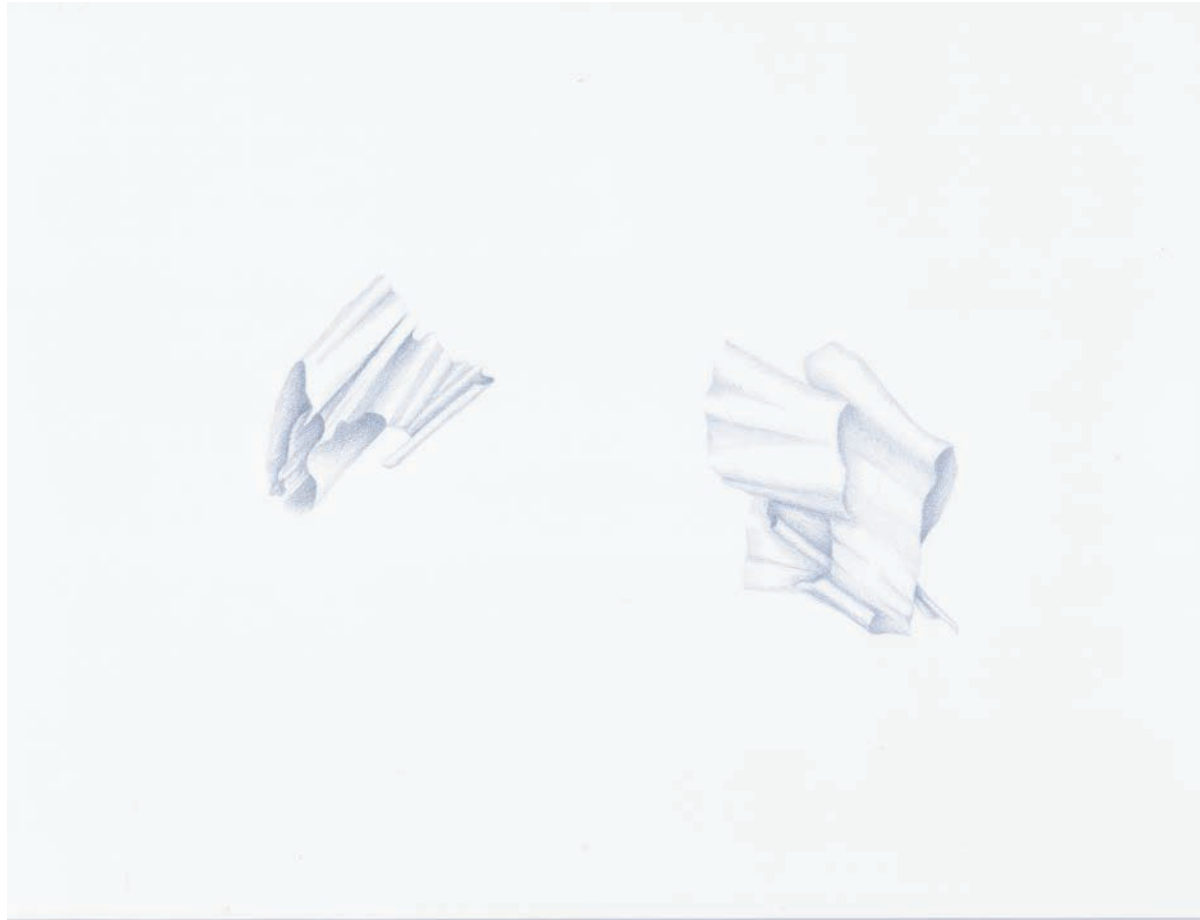








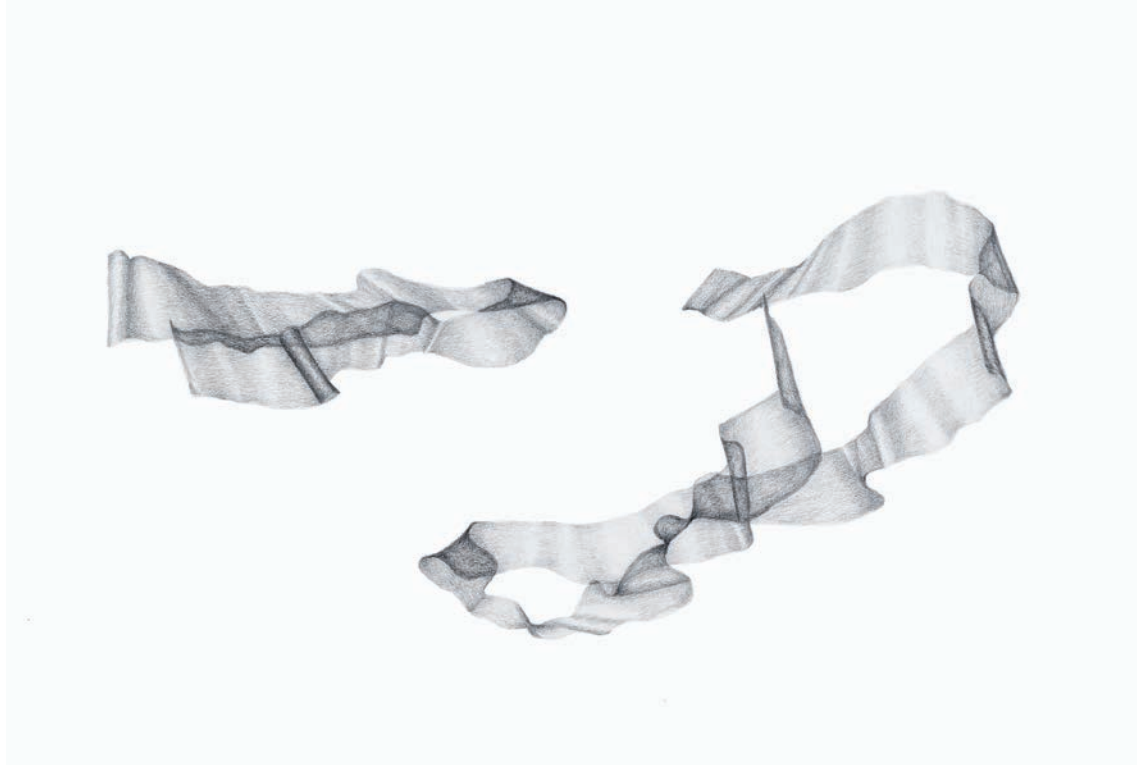






















*Jrah*, 2023, corrugated cardboard







## ***Space Has Become This Material Thing*** **Exhibition Checklist**

***Adele***, 2023

vinyl

***Gestural Traces and Material Memory (Charles)***, 2022

colored pencil on paper

***Gestural Traces and Material Memory***, 2022

colored pencil and ink on paper

***All of Space is Just, Like, Particles of COVID or Something Sick***, 2023

honeycomb cardboard

***Anirudh***, 2023

corrugated cardboard

***It's Not That Much of a Distance for Me***, 2022

colored pencil on paper

***I Was in My Own Space for the First Time so I Felt Like I Could Just Walk Through***, 2022

colored pencil on paper

***So I Didn't Have to Close My Door and Try and Separate Myself from Everybody***, 2022

colored pencil on paper

***Jrah***, 2023

corrugated cardboard



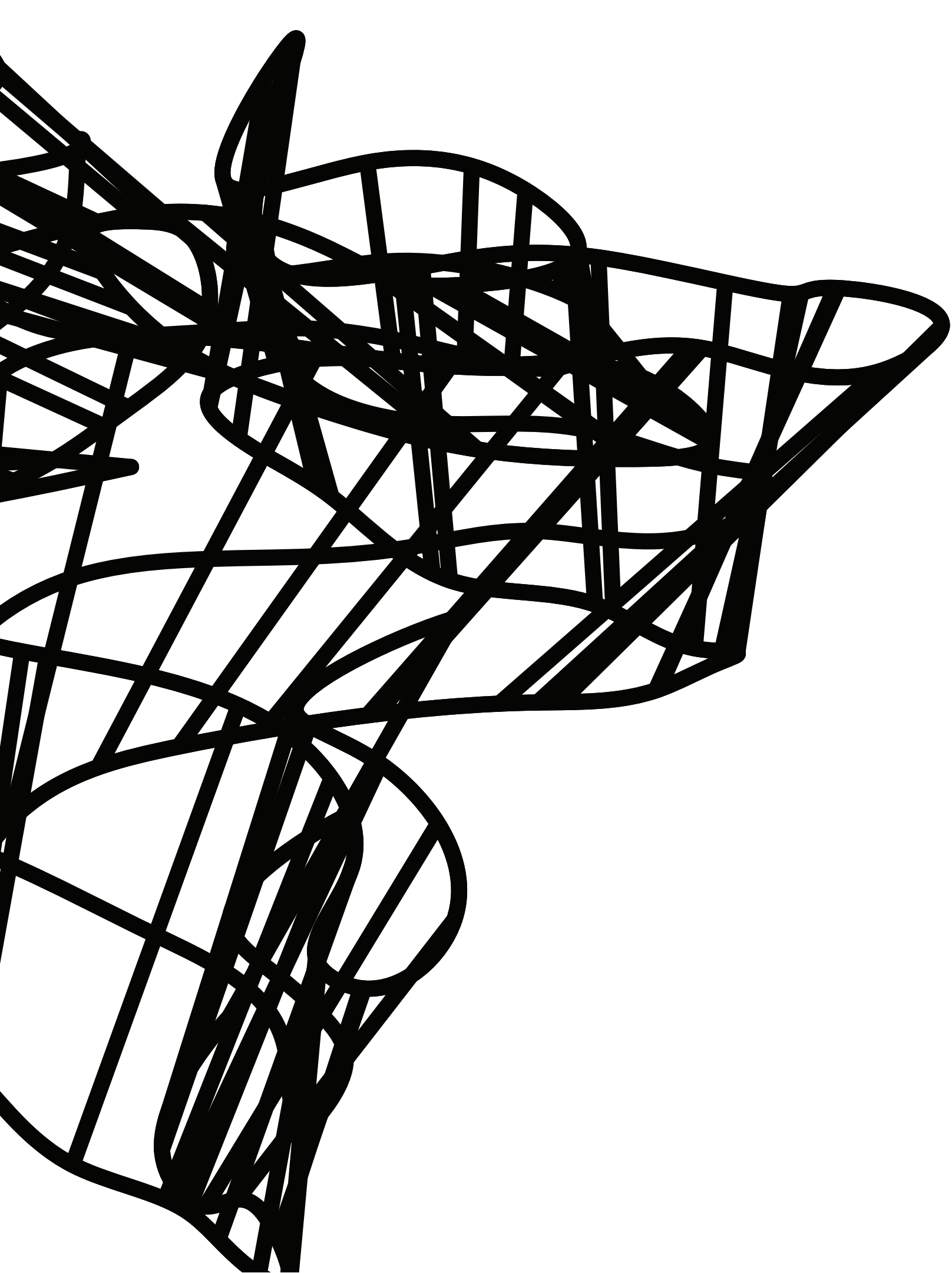


## Biographies

**Susan Giles's** work has shown in Chicago at the Chicago Cultural Center, The Hyde Park Art Center, THE MISSION, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and The Renaissance Society, as well as Mixed Greens in New York; Galería Valle Ortí in Valencia, Spain; and Five Years, London. Major commissions include a permanent sculpture for the University of Chicago in 2021 and a public art commission by Jason Rosenthal in memory of Amy Krouse Rosenthal for the Chicago Park District in 2019. In 2021 Giles was on Creative Capital's Shortlist. She has received numerous grants, including an Individual Artist Project Grant from DCASE in 2022, 2019, 2017, and 2015, awards from the Illinois Arts Council in 2014 and 2009, a 2005 Louis Comfort Tiffany Award, and a 1998 Fulbright Grant to Indonesia. Giles is an Associate Professor in the Department of Contemporary Practices at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a 2023 Visiting Teaching Fellow in Built Environment, Arts, Design & Architecture at the University of New South Wales in Sydney.

**Teresa E. Silva** is a writer, curator, and member of the artist cooperative Tiger Strikes Asteroid Chicago. Prior to 2023, Silva was the executive and artistic director of the Chicago Artists Coalition.





## Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Teresa E. Silva for penning such an eloquent essay; the curatorial team of Mark Porter, Cecilia L. Vargas, and Meg Duguid and their exhibitions team consisting of preparator Cassandra Meek and the student staff: Adele Hink, Zicky Delamarter, Rachel Manlubatan, Sienna Rowe, and Gray Beyer for all of their fantastic work in the exhibition's production, installation, and design of this catalog; Nate Carder and his team in the Makerspace Facilities for their facility support in creating the exhibition; and Tom Van Eynde and Johnathan Castillo for taking the exhibition photos.

The artist would like to thank the participants in this project: Anirudh Singh Shaktawat, Jrah Joshua, Adele Hink, Sue Young, Barbara Hershberger, Charles, Rea Moody, Sis Kealey, Judy Malin, Julia, Allan Anderson, and Susan Anderson.

This project is partially supported by an Individual Artist Program Grant from the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events, as well as a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency, a state agency, through federal funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts. This project is also partially supported by The Hambidge Center, in Rabun Gap, Georgia, in the form of a 2022 artist residency.