

# Magazine INLIQUID™

Exhibition Essay  
November 19, 2021

## Palimpsests of Identities: Material Voices at the InLiquid Gallery

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### INLIQUID MEMBERS

Annette Cords  
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Identities are complex and convoluted; they can also be messy and malleable while remaining continuously in flux. A good visualization of all this complexity is the notion of the palimpsest. In the study of texts, the palimpsest is a page of writing which has had text erased or removed so that more text can be applied over top of the original. Through this process, traces of the original text are left slightly visible as ghostly remnants on the page. If we make a correlation of the palimpsest to identity, a palimpsest is then something which is built up by layering while retaining evidence of the earlier layers. In the *Material Voices* exhibition at The InLiquid Gallery, both Annette Cords and G Farrel Kellum's works contend with different identities and how they are formed as woven and sculptural palimpsests. Through the processes of layering, concealing, and revealing of images, impressions, and text, both artists create complex visual metaphors of identity formation. Not only do Cords and Kellum explore the intertwined and amorphous nature of identities in their artistic practices, but they also construct their artworks as apparatuses that examine the relationship between singular and collective identities.

If we conceive of the interaction between singular and collective identities as an ongoing dialogue, then the exchange can be considered a form of communication. As Jean-Luc Nancy has stated, "this consciousness—or this communication—is ecstasy: which is to say that such a consciousness is never mine, but to the contrary, I only have it in and through the community." [1] Both

Cords and Kellum question how the collective is manifested in the singular by exploring the dialogical exchange between the singular and collective and by weaving the everyday vernacular into their artworks. Yet, their woven and sculptural investigations don't stop there because they also draw attention to how the singular can be subsumed or erased by the dominant narratives of the collective, or as Kellum has stated: "I'm very much drawn to tags and hits as opposed to the more colorful and conceptually design forms of graffiti. To me these tags represent lost voices from the distant past as well as the present and voices not heard yet in the future." [2] The messy interplay between the singular and collective is presented in their artworks as unexpected juxtapositions of competing information, images, and mark making.

If we can conceive of each individual as the site of the singular/collective interchange, we can also detect a compelling overlap with the formation and understanding of the identity of place. This conceptual overlap embodies another key aspect of the pieces that have been gathered in the *Material Voices* exhibition. In the woven and sculptural works of Cords and Kellum, the study of identity as a palimpsest is also extended to the identity of place. This extended analysis considers how places, especially the public forum of urban streets, communicates with the city dweller. Cords has referred to this interaction as "being receptive to what presents itself." [3] Just as the individual is the site for the exchange between competing forces, so too are the streets. The streets are interstitial zones of colliding desires, histories, and identities formed through the layering and fracturing of different voices. The overlap of visual information in the works of Cords and Kellum draws direct inspiration from the eclectic visual field that one experiences while moving through the urban environment. What is seen and what is not seen, or whose voices are present or absent, form a sort of politics of aesthetics because it is through visibility (or lack thereof) that different voices have a presence within the identity of place. As Jacques Rancière has written, the significance of the visibility of a voice should not be underestimated because "it is the delimitation of... the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of the politics as a form of experience." [4] By understanding the layering of actions and histories that occur in place, we can also realize that there are often alternative or forgotten histories and voices occurring just under the surface of the architectural facades, often left behind as barely perceptible traces. Cords and Kellum strive to hold onto these sometimes-forgotten snippets of histories and identities.

The dynamic process of identity formation, whether it be for people or places, remains betwixt and between any sort of settled or concretized state. This unresolved status is reflected in the conceptualization and construction of the artworks that comprise the *Material Voices* exhibition. For example, Cords displays some

of her weavings so that the backside is visible. In doing so, Cords leaves the viewer to wonder why what is typically concealed has instead been revealed. For Cords, the artwork is not the front of the weaving or the back, but rather the evolving relationship between them which the viewer experiences in real time as they circle around the sculpture.

These works are also meant to challenge the viewer to consider both the liberation and erasure that occurs in the shaping of identities. Cords and Kellum present incisive and purposefully open-ended questions in their works which urge the viewer to sort through the implications of formulating any answers. As one departs the exhibition space, the queries presented through the art objects are intended to linger in one's consciousness—what is the role of the language and mark-making in the articulation of identity? How do voices become material so they are not lost into the ether? How does the metaphysical become physical? How do places communicate with us and how do we respond? The objective of this exhibition is not to supply a clear and concise answer—simply, because there isn't one. Instead, these artists have embraced, and brought to view, the complexity of the layering, fragmenting, concealing, and revealing that constitutes the mutability of any given singularity. Nancy deems this ontological status as being "singular plural"—both at the same time, never one without the other. Through the presentation of their consciously reflective woven and sculptural works, Cords and Kellum remind us that identities are like patchworked palimpsests, beautifully muddled and knotty.

## ENDNOTES

[1] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 1st ed. (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991). 19.

[2] G Farrell Kellum, email message to author, November 9, 2021.

[3] Annette Cords in discussion with the author, November 2021.

[4] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2006, 13.

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