

# PublicWorks



**Martin Boyce**

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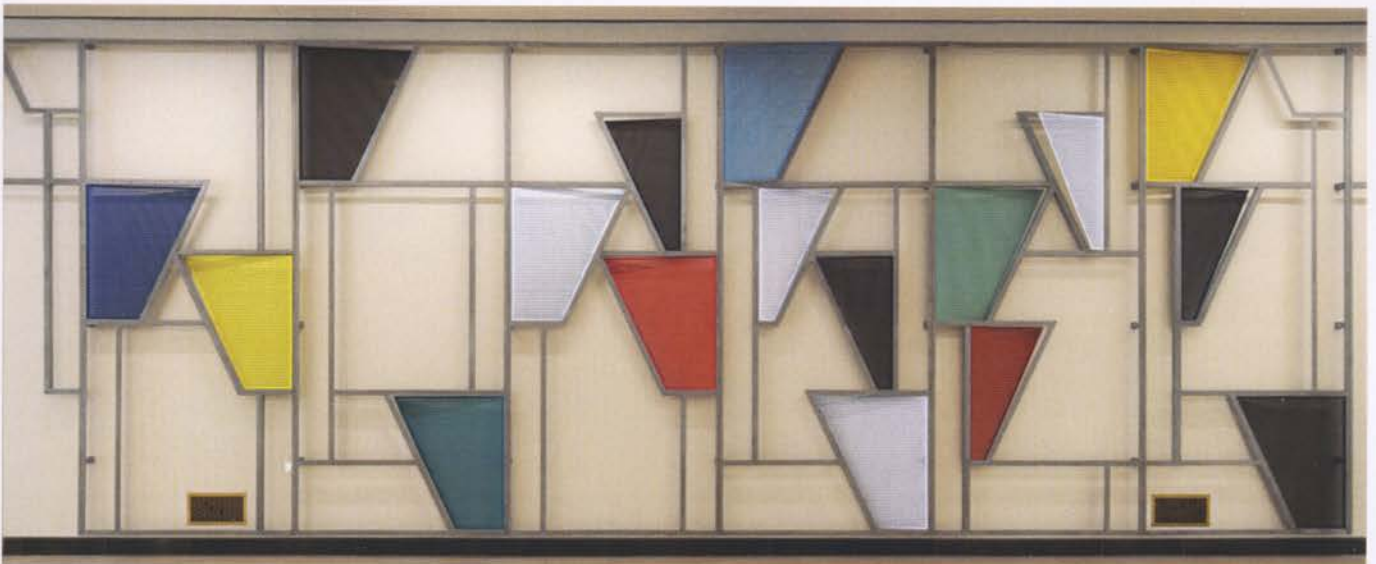
***Through Layers and Leaves (Closer and Closer),***  
**2010**

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**A Percent-for-Art Commission for the David H. Koch  
Institute for Integrative Cancer Research at MIT**

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**MIT Building 76**



## Martin Boyce

Can a fence feel melancholic? What makes a trash can ecstatic or a chair disillusioned? As sculptor Martin Boyce wonders, “Can I make a table sad or heavy or exposed and lost?”<sup>1</sup> The Glasgow-based artist imbues the icons of twentieth-century design as well as the neglected and overlooked elements of contemporary urbanism with distinct, almost human qualities. His sculptures are cast as protagonists in an alternative, parallel story of modernist design and public art that alludes to fates they may have suffered or experiences they have undergone. “Are the objects in their natural place,” Boyce asks, “or are they marooned in an imaginative landscape?”<sup>2</sup>

The environments Boyce has been creating in museums or galleries since the 1990s are sparse, haunted versions of spaces where nature and man-made elements coexist in a state of unease. His are landscapes of aftermath: empty gardens, abandoned zoos, defunct public playgrounds. Boyce populates these places with utilitarian objects that appear to have suffered from overuse, vandalism, severe weather, or neglect. In one of his early iconic installations *Our Love is Like the Flowers, the Rain, the Sea and the Hours* in 2003, he turned a former Glasgow tram station into an abandoned urban park where chain-link fences provided little security and trash bins leaned dangerously to one side. In installations like these, park benches have no seats, holes gape in barriers, trees are leafless and barren, and patio umbrellas are broken as if a storm has blown through. Smaller details suggest a moment frozen in time: a concrete ping-pong table has a slouching metal net; a discarded length of garden hose is abandoned in the corner.

Along with these utilitarian items, Boyce’s formal vocabulary draws on iconic objects of modernist design. What has happened to these once avant-garde, utopian creations? In his works, these once-pristine and radical designs reappear as isolated, displaced, or tarnished relics, suffering from the effects of entropy. Some appear to have been the target of vandals, like the graffitied light fixture in *Illuminated Breath* (2007), or burned, like the Charles and Ray Eames storage unit in *White Disaster* (2000). In *It was Summer, Now It’s Autumn* (2003), fragments of an Arne Jacobsen chair are suspended in pieces from a Calder-esque mobile. Boyce shows how these designs are not immune to the effects of age: “It becomes about the time surrounding the object as much as the object itself, as if the object has had a life, or will have a life. That’s what interests me, the narrative that might surround things.”<sup>3</sup>

Boyce’s installation for the David H. Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research at MIT quotes from the stories of previous public sculptures and artistic interventions from twentieth-century modernism. *Through Layers and Leaves (Closer and Closer)* takes an unconventional place within the building’s architecture: on the wall of the lobby, where one might expect a painted mural, Boyce has constructed a three-dimensional metal fence fixed to the wall, and beneath it, three custom-made ventilation grills. According to Boyce, he immediately knew that he wanted to make a running fence in the building’s entrance, as a “threshold between public and private.” The fence’s geometric steel framework creates a jigsaw effect: some of its gaps are occupied by quadrilateral, brightly colored perforated-steel flaps, which resemble puzzle pieces that haven’t quite been pushed into place, or flags that might wave in the breeze if there were one.

You could think of Boyce’s installation as a rebellious descendant of modernist public sculptures, closely related to two works in particular: the first is a group of “marooned” sculptures that were, in their day, the redheaded stepchildren of public sculpture. The objects in question, which have furnished Boyce with many of the forms he has used in previous installations, are four concrete trees that appeared in the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris in 1925. Robert Mallet-Stevens, the avant-garde Art Deco architect and designer who was commissioned to design the pavilion of modern housing, asked twin brothers Jan and Joël Martel to create an outdoor sculpture for the courtyard. Their radical proposal was not a monumental fountain or a bronze equestrian statue but four, towering, abstract concrete trees. The Martels’ design transformed the tree into angular, solid slabs that radiated irregularly from the central trunk, as if interpreting a cubist painting of a tree as a monumental five-meter monochromatic concrete sculpture. Heavy, imposing, and obviously artificial, they didn’t blend into the cultivated atmosphere of the gardens (though the idea was ivy would eventually grow to cover them). During their brief tenure at the exposition, the sculptures were reviled by the public and even lampooned in political cartoons. Perhaps too much ahead of their time, they were eventually removed and dismantled.

But they were not forgotten. Several years ago, Boyce encountered them in an archival photograph and set about reverse engineering the trees and subjecting their shapes to a series of loose formal experiments “to see what new transformations they could endure.” The triangles, parallelograms, and irregular geometries of the disassembled Martel trees developed into a lexicon of forms he used and reused to create screens and fences, ventilation grills, architectural pillars, a mattress frame, telephone booths, ashtrays, and eventually a chandelier. He even turned their geometric planes sideways and upside down until he was eventually to create an entire alphabet based on their forms. The “incomplete repeat” pattern in the fence and the grills of *Through Layers and Leaves (Closer and Closer)* are both derived from a similar operation with the trees.

The younger and more obvious formal ancestor of this piece is Ellsworth Kelly’s monumental *Sculpture for a Large Wall*, designed in 1957. The American artist, like the Martel brothers, also came to abstraction through looking at natural forms. At the age of 34, his avant-garde status earned him his largest commission: to construct a public work for the Transportation Building in Penn Center, Philadelphia. As an antidote to the building’s functional quality, Kelly opted to make a rectangular aluminium grid supporting a succession of buoyant, angled silver planes and colored squares. These dynamic shapes were suspended by their sixty-five-foot-long scaf-





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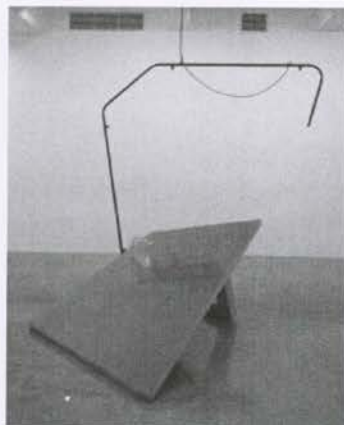
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1  
Jan and Joël Martel, concrete trees for Robert Mallet-Stevens's Pavillon of Transports, *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, 1925

2  
*Concrete Autumn (Phantom Tree)*, 2005, mounted photograph (gelatin silver print), painted wooden frame, 48.4 x 32.5 x 1.6 in., ed. 4 of 10 plus 2 APs, Courtesy of the Artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow. Photo: Ruth Clark

3  
*We are resistant, we dry out in the sun (This place opens and unfolds us)*, 2004, powder coated steel, 102.4 x 74.8 x 10.6 in., installation view *We Art Resistant, We Dry Out In The Sun*, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich, 2004, Courtesy of the Artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow. Photo: Stefan Altenburger

4  
*Our Love is Like the Flowers, the Rain, the Sea and the Hours*, 2002, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, installation view *Our Love is Like the Flowers, the Rain, the Sea and the Hours*, Tramway, Glasgow, 2002, Courtesy of the Artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow. Photo: Keith Hunter

5  
*You Are My Gravity*, 2007, concrete and aluminum, 40 x 114 x 84.1 in., installation view *We Make an Unsubstantial Territory*, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, 2007, Courtesy of Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow, Collection: Jill and Peter Kraus. Photo: 2007 Fabian Birgfeld, PhotoTECTONICS

folding to appear as if they were floating, like a succession of sails at sea. The work was installed like a giant frieze above the elevators in the building's lobby, while large windows afforded a view of it from outside.

Like the Martels' cubist trees, Kelly's sculpture has survived several peaks and valleys in the course of its life: it aged, as did the modernist building it was commissioned for, and eventually the building was seen as an eyesore. In the late 1990s, when it was scheduled for renovation, the owners opted not to keep Kelly's installation. Fortunately the piece was saved (the brass screens made for the same building were not as lucky) and eventually donated to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where it remains in storage. More than the shape itself, it is the character or what the monumental work has endured that Boyce adopts for his own sculpture for a large wall.

Though Boyce quotes the Martels' and Kelly's works, he also imbues *Through Layers and Leaves (Closer and Closer)* with its own site-specific meanings. This is one of many works he has made to resemble a fence, screen, or barrier that seems to contradict its utilitarian functions of security or shielding. Rather, his fences and gates are often left open, to become, in Boyce's words "sculptures that you can pass through." The fence in *Through Layers and Leaves (Closer and Closer)* is affixed so close to the wall that it fails to function as a secure barrier, instead becoming a permeable screen between public and private—indeed, a metaphor for this kind of building itself. Its grid looks like it could be a pattern or an enlarged

script that tempts us to interpret it. Or, similarly, it could loosely imitate the process by which scientists, like the ones who work in this building, might seek to discern meaningful patterns in nature. Boyce likens the process of encountering it to "recognizing forms and molecular structures through a microscope."

The irony of a decorative barrier—suspended between the abstract and the figurative, between nature and the man-made, between art and instrumentality—is not lost on Boyce. His deliberate choice of materials—a heavy-duty steel structure (galvanized to lend it a patina of use), and the kind of perforated metal used for public park benches—borrows heavily from the language of urban architecture. He also appropriates weather-resistant lacquer paint designed specifically to resist vandals, overuse, and the natural elements. In an indoor space like this one in a private university, the advantages of these materials are rendered obsolete. Boyce recasts them in new roles as design elements rather than practical ones.

*Through Layers and Leaves (Closer and Closer)* works on both a macro and a micro scale. Beneath the expansive fence, the work subtly inserts itself into the smaller architectural details of its surroundings. Boyce singles out the ventilation grill—one of the more overlooked elements of architecture—as a portal into the building. He started making these adapted vents in 2003, using them to convey messages by changing the lattice of the grid to form characters from his Martel alphabet. Though there is no sound of air coming from these decorative vents, they still manage to whisper to us: hidden in the design of each grill are letters that spell "closer"



"and" "closer". That we have to draw nearer in order to discern the words—to look at an overlooked aspect of the building—shifts our attention toward the threshold between the public space of the lobby and inner workings of the building. Beckoning us "closer and closer" to the fence itself also creates a unique relationship between the viewer and the sculpture: rather than prompting us to stand back and admire it, it asks us to bend down and peer into the dark recesses of its surroundings. This kind of spatial relationship is also particularly poignant in a building whose activities are dedicated to intricate scientific investigations.

Boyce's sculptures resemble things we know, but appear displaced or stranded in their new environments—the bench you can no longer sit on, the barrier you can pass through, the vent that doesn't spew air. They are truly "marooned" objects, and as such, they are relieved of their usual functions and asked to take on new, less rigidly defined roles. *Through Layers and Leaves (Closer and Closer)* skirts the usual monumentality of sculptures commissioned

for public spaces to acknowledge its own displacement, its own lack of function, and its dilution from idealized forms. It resembles something urban and contemporary, but it also carries lingering utopian ideals and spectral traces of sculptures past, which you can see if you look—closer and closer.

Christy Lange

1. Martin Boyce, *No Reflections* (Dundee, Scotland: Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2009), 9.
2. *Ibid.*, 7.
3. All quotations, unless otherwise noted, Martin Boyce, in discussion with the author, March 2011.

For more information about this and other MIT Percent-for-Art projects, please visit: [http://listart.mit.edu/public\\_art](http://listart.mit.edu/public_art)

**Martin Boyce** was born in 1967 in Hamilton, Scotland, and currently lives and works in Glasgow. Boyce studied at the Glasgow School of Art, receiving a BA in Environmental Art (1990) and an MFA (1997). He was selected as Scottish representative for the 2009 Venice Biennale and his work was included in the 2007 Sculpture Projects Münster. Recent solo exhibitions took place at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK; Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster, Germany; and Centre d'art Contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland. The artist's works can be found in the collections of the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow; MMK, Frankfurt; the Tate, London; and FRAC, Bourgogne, France among others.

**Christy Lange** is a Berlin-based writer and Associate Editor of the contemporary art magazine *frieze*. Her published work includes catalogue texts and books on Thomas Demand, Fischli&Weiss, Luigi Ghirri, Nedko Solakov, and Chris Ofili, among others. Her articles have also appeared in *o32c*, *Foam*, *Monocle*, *Tate* etc., and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In 2009 she received an Arts Writers Grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation, and she is currently at work on a book about war photography.

**About Public Art at MIT:** MIT's Percent-for-Art program allots funds to commission or purchase art for each new major renovation or building project. The program was formally instituted in 1968, but earlier collaborations between artists and architects can be found on the Institute's campus. When architect Eero Saarinen designed the MIT Chapel in 1955, sculptor Theodore Roszak designed the bell tower and sculptor Harry Bertoina designed the altar screen. In 1985 architect I. M. Pei and artists Scott Burton, Kenneth Noland, and Richard Fleischner collaborated on a Percent-for-Art program for the Wiesner Building, home to the MIT List Visual Arts Center. Other Percent-for-Art works have been commissioned or purchased from such artists as Mark di Suvero, Jackie Ferrara, Dan Graham, Candida Höfer, Anish Kapoor, Sol LeWitt, Louise Nevelson, Jorge Pardo, Matthew Ritchie, and Sarah Sze.

Martin Boyce was selected as artist for the project by a committee of MIT faculty and staff that included: Adele Santos, Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning; Theresa M. Stone, Executive Vice President and Treasurer; Harry Ellenzweig, Architect; Tyler Jacks, Director of the Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research and David H. Koch Professor; Karl Dane Wittrup, J.R. Mares Professor, Chemical Engineering & Bioengineering; Jacqueline Lees, Associate Director of the Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research, Professor & Ludwig Scholar; Jane Farver, Director of the MIT List Visual Arts Center; Richard Amster, Director of Facilities; Pamela Delphenich, Director of Campus Planning and Design; and James May, Senior Project Manager.

The artwork was made possible by MIT's Percent-for-Art program, the British Council, and the generosity of the Robert D. ('64) and Sara-Ann Sanders Family.

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Cover:  
Martin Boyce  
*Through Layers and Leaves (Closer and Closer)*, 2010  
Galvanized mild steel, two-pack paint, and acid etched brass  
Commissioned with MIT Percent-for-Art Funds and a generous gift from the Robert D. ('64) and Sara-Ann Sanders Family.  
Photo: MIT List Visual Arts Center