

I'm sentimental

STEPHANIE BROOKS





Untitled, 2006, acrylic, screenprint, 9" x 9"

Hard Feelings: Stephanie Brooks

By Lauren Berlant

I. Minimalism, Feminism, Sentiment

This essay on Stephanie Brooks' art is also a meditation on affect, emotion, formalism, and feminism, the kinds of thing her art makes you wonder about. Brooks' work often takes the shape of a series, a series not shaped by genre, exactly, but by form, form being a kind of repetition that induces the double-take of recognition because events become predictable (oh, that sound again, *that* line, *that* shape, *that* feeling). Her work takes up book shapes, poem shapes, forms from ordinary life that usually induce inattention because of their reliable intelligibility.

But here they call out from their cool stability toward something else: The kinds of anger and outrage that can trip over pleasure at the edge of a joke. But it would be easy not to catch this drift, because the works' practice of formal re-enactment often convolutes feeling as it extends form. It recalls work like Jenny Holzer's or Barbara Kruger's without being much like that work, which is very noisy. Brooks' practice of formalism opens up unusual questions about how engaged art works if it re-enacts ordinary sights on behalf of interfering with ordinary affects and feelings *without manifesting those scenes explicitly*. If implicitation weren't already a word, it would be invented to describe the activity of Brooks' body of work. But Brooks' process is a paradox, since the work is so *formal* and so *verbal*, so out there and yet so mildly jutting out into and interfering with space. What hails your attention often points to retention. I proceed with some examples of her art of extraverted withdrawal, of giving-as-withholding.

Art history literate viewers of Brooks' work will immediately read its formalism in the context of two traditions. On one side, one sees the mark of Dadaesque deployments of clichéd word and image, outrage and iconoclasm, and anti-bourgeois counter-conventionalism; on the other, the minimalist tradition in sculpture and painting, with its emphasis on affirmation in negation, erasure, pure color, sound, gesture. One looks at her work and can draw a simple line to Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Ann Truitt. For example: Form and formalism, there, represent an anti-sentimental, anti-absorptive refusal of mimetic-affective identification, or at least demand the quieting down of the noise of emotion in the aesthetic encounter. This mode of artwork tries not to produce an echo in the viewer, but makes an environment where something else resonates. The aesthetic exchange is therefore never in imitative scale: A large work can induce a small, off-center impact; a cool piece can provoke something hot. At the same time both of these traditions emphasize something kinetic and intuitive in the aesthetic event, even when the aesthetic event is purely conceptual. Something happens in the viewer's bodily response, which then has to be shaped using whatever skills of ordering and eloquence — cognitive, emotive — the viewer has.

These two lineages, one hotter and one cooler, each transform when they meet in Brooks' work, which uses cool form and hot text to interfere with emotion in the service of a critical anti-sentimentality.

How to create apertures in normative affect and emotion without representing them, to create a space of reflection without overtelling how to do it, to produce affective release without promising anything about feeling good, feeling right, feeling well, or feeling superior? It is queasy-making, paradox-producing work that engineers both an unanxious attachment to the object (you usually know what it is) *and* affective instability in the penumbra around it.

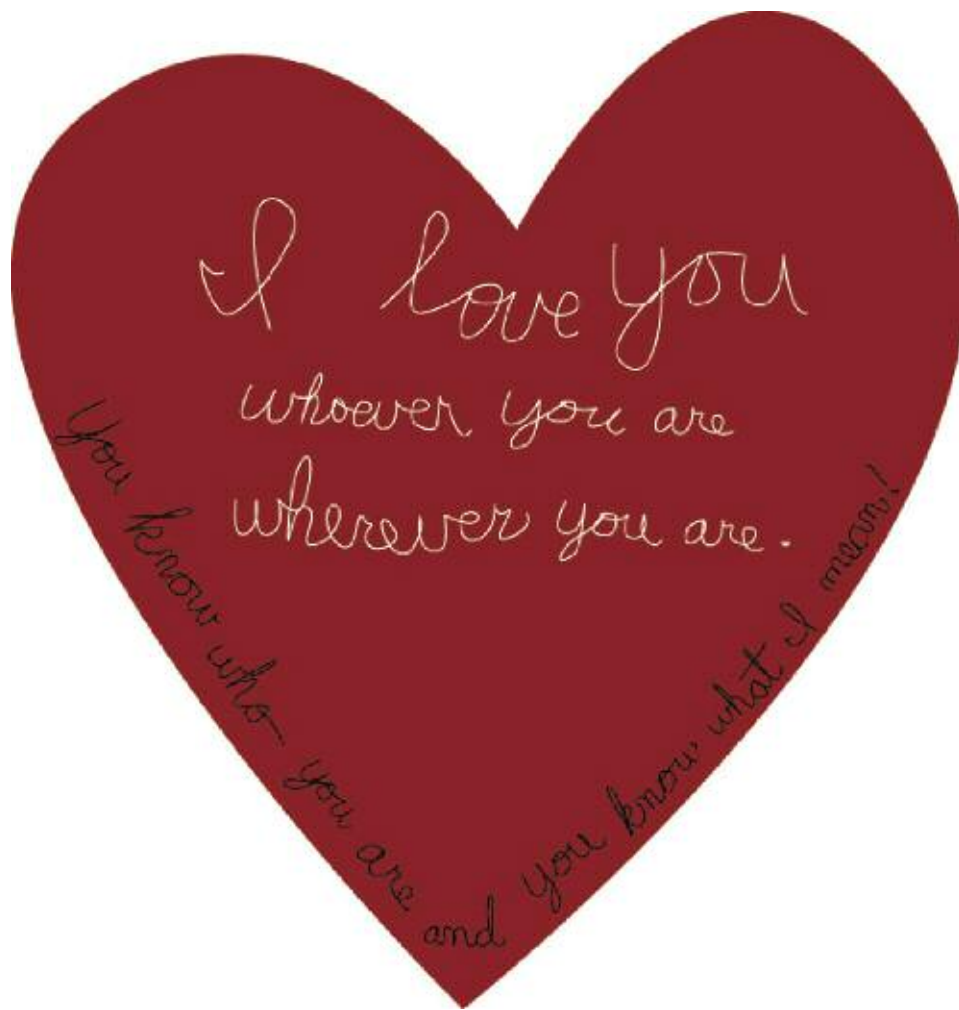
Sentimentality is not what a middlebrow or highbrow consumer of aesthetic theory or art is usually trained to think it is. The cultivated aesthete is trained to look down on the sentimental as appetitive and mawkish (which comes from the Old Icelandic *ma{edh}kr maggot*, to signify nauseating), a low emotion that appeals to base fears and desires without siphoning them through intelligence. Sometimes "sentimental" is tainted with the word *commodity* to affirm how primitive and base the desires being animated by the sentimental object are. But in the philosophical and popular tradition a swerve exists between low sentimentality and high sentiment or sensibility. The low is a bodily response, autonomic; the high may be deemed cultivated or natural, but whatever its source, it is a wellspring both of virtue in the person that enables recognizing what's good, and of empathic pain that recognizes suffering and injustice. If bad sentimentality grounds you in your body, good sentimentality is a source for compassion, connection, belonging, recognition. What links these two traditions is the presumption that at the true core of the human subject are emotions that bind persons to other people, performing reciprocity, the ligament of sociality itself. But Brooks puts a kink in these links.

Another part of what motivates this practice is the feminist context buried in the quietness of form that the work always mobilizes: The art feminist practice of interrupting norms of realism associated with women's presumed closeness to emotion and embodiment. A long history from Martha Rosler and Laura Mulvey to Mona Hatoum and Chris Krauss might be telegraphed here, but Brooks does not take on the project by exploding feminine fantasy-saturated embodiments that shape the problematics of the real. In Brooks' work, the body is absent, except in the body of the voice. Affect and emotion are made impersonal through formalism, and blatant expressivity reveals a hive of unsaids. But Brooks' training in feminist art practice at the Art Institute of Chicago, and her recent re-deployment of domesticalia (or even better, *paraphernalia* (from *paraphernalis*, meaning "having to do with a woman's possessions, but not including her dowry"), points to this third, feminist, force of influence. Still, the cleavage in her work of voice from body makes producing aesthetic and affective reciprocity in the art-event even more of a challenge.

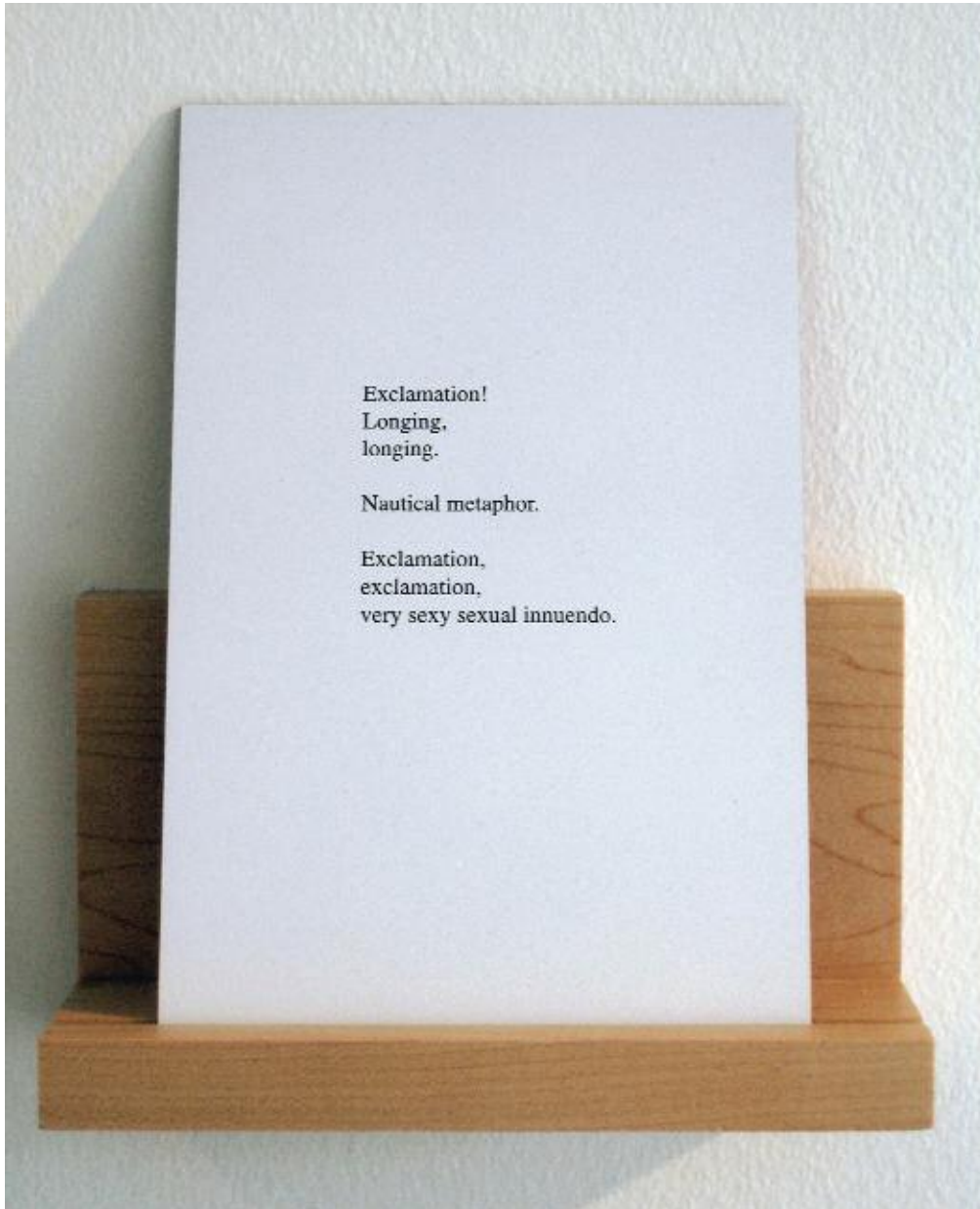
II. In which the Heart Doesn't Stand in for the Whole

Let's look, for example, at Brooks' valentine, "*I love you*," (2006). What is this piece trying to do? It's a funny thing, hardness of heart. This piece reminds me of David Halperin's claim that sex has and should not be seen, always, or at its best, as a vehicle for securing a "web of mutuality."¹

On the face of it, this heart is caught up and indeed is the very figure of mutuality. It is a heart, a valentine's heart, shaped as though with a bad instrument, a dull scissor of the kind a child might use. It is recognizable immediately, at least to viewers who have a history with Valentine's Day. Handmade, it is asymmetrical like a real heart. It has a message on it, from an anonymous sender, to a receiver who remains unnamed: It needs only an address (To:) and a signature (Love,) to make the conventional phrase into a heartfelt transmission from one singular, complex being to another. But that exchange of singularity is withheld here. Instead, Stephanie Brooks' valentine heart foregrounds, in white ink, the promise of a feminine love that can find a general you wherever a general you is and will suffuse the general you however you are the moment it reaches you, with love. The card holds you because it does not name you. On the other hand, it keeps you at a distance for the same reason.



I love you, 2006, etched zinc, enamel, 18" x 18"



Untitled love poem #3, 2005, etched zinc, enamel, wood shelf, 7.5" x 5.5" x 2.5"

White writing is associated with Luce Irigaray and the project of *écriture féminine*, which associated it with feminine milk, the unmediated inscription of the feminine body on all of its productions. The feminist tradition from which Stephanie Brooks comes thought a lot about that: the impress of femininity on the art object. From that perspective, in which femininity produces uncanny writing, the valentine feels personal not because we know who wrote it but because the woman who wrote it has a human scrawl, somewhat girly and somewhat childlike. Love's handwriting impresses the body's imperfect desire on an imperfect heart that marks no limits to its capaciousness. Whoever you are, wherever you are. It is unconditional love of the sort that makes you wonder and shake your head.

In black, at the bottom, though, the valentine forces yet another double-take. It makes a demand of the receiver, and thus violates valentine norms. Across the bottom margin the same hand, now black, asserts, "You know who you are and you know what I mean!" Here, the valentine takes on a bossy tone, which is the opposite of the loving, holding, absorptive exchange promised in the declarative sweetness of the generic "I love you." It makes a demand — Know who you are! Know what I mean! It also implicitly accuses "you" of withholding that knowledge, or not acting on it. *Someone* in the love relation must know who the "I" is, and who the "you" is. This valentine outsources that burden onto the receiver.

At the same time, by delivering all of this unto "you," the work forces you out of assurance, into a place where you are revealed as incompetent to receive the love you have just received as simultaneously unconditional and demanding. "Your" place is now marked as the place of undeservingness, since you may not know who you are or what "I" meant when she said "I love you." But wait! Is it a gift or a test that you have already failed by not already being transparent and docile to the desires of the unconditional lover? This "I love you" is a demand in the guise of a gift. But it remains a gift. It is a perfectly doubled double bind, this heart: the love that keeps on giving and keeps on taking, all noisy and all sweet. It produces a shared sense of recognition in the iconicity of its construction paper heart form and withholds satisfaction in the form of its conventional words: convention — normative, dependable, reiterated form — transmits inassimilable affects without breaking the ties that bind.

In other words, this perfect piece enacts what it might mean for something to fray sentimental conventions without breaking aesthetic ones, which themselves are sentimental. The viewer does and does not know what love is, who s/he is, who the writer is, what "I" means: The very act of recognition takes out the conditions for recognition. And yet something happens, something in the air is transmitted, though perturbed.

What happens is that the feminine scrawl no longer bears the burden of emotional intelligibility that women are supposed to provide for their beloveds. It intimates something about the violence that is transacted when one kind of being is supposed to provide emotional intelligibility for another kind of being: It intimates something about the intensity of the demand that there be something simple, like a heart, in proximity to the unsentimental demand that you be there now, to receive my love. But the recognition of violence, of aggression at the heart of desire, does not break the suture of intimacy Brooks' form first elicits. What's unsaid in the expression binds one closer to the scene of need, demand, reciprocity, love. So the valentine is not metonymic in the usual way, nor embodied in the usual way, nor emotional in the usual way, but it sustains in form what the language skews.

The intensity of this piece is played out more lightly in Brooks' cognate work on love, *Love Songs* (2001; a collaboration with Joshua C. Bowes). Lightness is another effect of Brooks' work, but it is not the opposite of seriousness.

It does not matter much that the reader of this piece of writing cannot read Brooks' music and lyrics closely. To be an art of proprioception, of inducing the viewer's body to feel different in space, is the desire of such sculpture. *Love Songs* is yet another reenactment of love's vernacular appearance (as is the cruel and funny series the *Untitled Love Poems* (2005), which strips the love lyric to its grammatical conventions). Brooks mounts *Love Songs* with pages open to the songs, on a shelf. Brooks loves the shelf as a minor medium for interrupting space. On it she can prompt an aesthetic exchange without binding the artwork or the viewer to the scene, as though the laying of the piece here were casual. One imagines that aesthetic and other intimacies are all about propping, being propped.

But the book of *Love Songs* was also bound as though to provoke opportunities for distribution and further re-performance. One could leave this work on any piano or music stand and no one would know that it was never meant to be performed with or as music. So the music on the page represents a tease, a seduction to say and sing aloud in the theoretical, scientific, and everyday idioms of love. But in the ordinary viewing scene there hovers a desired silence around the words, a desire for the artwork to be something enchanting and chanted in the reader's head later, as a kind of whisper transmitted between ghosts.

What do we learn about love from *Love Songs*, the usual thing about fantasy, longing, disappointment, and feminine eloquence about it all? What Brooks provides is not the usual stuff about the inevitable misrecognition or awkwardness in love, or anything wholly dark. There is something in the form of the *Love Songs* that lightens everything it touches: A simple letter from mom becomes a funny recording of ordinariness; a tragic newspaper story becomes a ballad, and lovely. They represent love in practice. The entries from Freud and Edmund Burke are love in theory. Freud's claim is that the pleasure principle's purpose is not to secure ecstasy but to use repetition as a kind of pacing to help manage the appetites from being overwhelming; Edmund Burke's claim is that the greatest beauty induces a feeling of love but not base desire. So both theorists are interested in what frees one from the claims of appetite. This is not a worry of the vernacular lovers.

The final piece, "Scales," uses personality-testing phrases from the Extraversion part of the "Five Factor Model" test, which also examines degrees of "Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience." It reminds us to attend to the interest in classification and disorder that also permeates Brooks' work. This piece is weirdly about the capacity for optimism, for self-knowledge, for loving the world. It reduces love to the capacity to assess multiple, incoherent "I" statements, but not to be destroyed by that multiplicity.

What makes this a book of love songs, then, is the form: The title is performative. The reader has to figure out whether love is identical to itself across these differently adapted genres or media. One ends up following the rhythms, distracted from meaning. Extraversion is a good word for the sociability of this piece, therefore. Its focus moves between sciences of the soul to ordinary exchanges between selves and

Dear Steph

March 28

Joan Brooks

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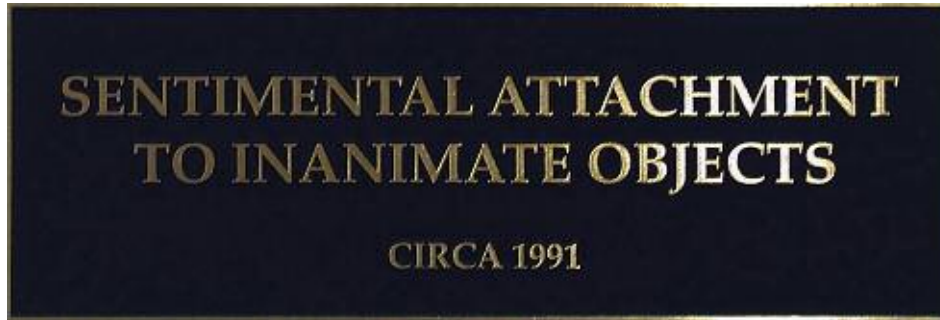
Dear Steph, En-closed is the band-aid to keep the Su-ba-ra in ser-vice for a while lon-ger. I hope it's a long while. You'll have plen-ty of o-the-r ex-pen-ses start-ing out in Cal-i-fa-go. We're do-ing well here. The spi-rach is sprout-ing in the gar-det, so we may have some to eat when you vi-sit. That'll be a-bout the time to plant the sun-roc flow-ers. I can en-joy-ing the ear-ly ones from Hol-land that Sa-rah gave us and the tu-lips will be here by Eas-ter. Their leaves are real-ly grow-ing now. We bought an e-lec-tric fence to con-tain the dogs but have-ri had it in-stalled yet. It'll be nice for them to fi-nal-ly be ab-le to run

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loose in the yard. We're try-ing to de-cide a-bout a va-ca-tion. I'd like to take a train trip to Cal-i-for-nia. The South-west is so beau-ti-ful, I want to see the land. Dad would like to go fast to Maine. We may post-pone and go to Ger-ma-ny. In-ter. We'll see. Just spoke to Jen-ni-fer last night. She's en-joy-ing her new job and ci-ty. She's cur-rent-ly writ-ing a-bout K through eight test scores. Sa-rah is work-ing a-way at her dis-ser-ta-tion. She just do-ci-ded to move to San Di-e-go in June and fin-ish her re-search there. Please give Er-ic our love. We're look-ing for-ward to your vis-it. Love, Mom.

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Love Songs (detail), 2001, offset printing, 8.5" x 11", booklet 22 pgs.



Portrait, 2003, etched zinc, enamel, 3" x 9"

worlds, where the vulnerability of intimacy is everywhere sensed but given a kind of peace by the predictability of the form, the way it simply pulls you along the path of the dream that one's deepest, most binding emotions are simple.

The love songs are sweet, in that Keats-ean sense that unheard melodies are sweeter. They are also funny, in that the language is made at once banal and strange under the homogenizing force of sheet music, which is like a teleprompter forcing you along the continuities and gaps, and because the stacked lyrics interfere with each other as one reads. Also words like *Subaru* and *bandaid* are funny, as are statements like "I believe every cloud has a silver lining." Even tragedy is lightened up to poignancy via the love song form's adaptation. The chorus of "The pleasure principle" turns Freud's text into comedy just by being an unsingable chorus: "The plea-sure prin-ci-ple is a ten-den-cy op-er-a-ting in the ser-vice of a func-tion whose bus-i-ness it is to free the men-tal ap-pa-ra-tus en-tire-ly from ex-ci-ta-tion or to keep the a-mount of ex-ci-ta-tion in it con-stant or to keep it as low as pos-si-ble."

What is the function of lightness, humor, joking at the scene of love? I think it has little to do with Freud's sense that the joke always enacts sexual aggression.² I think it has little to do with exposing something dark and ruthless where people are most sincere.

Instead, these love songs that are not to be sung but only imagined as songs create a space of quietness amidst the noise of normativity, of demand, of femininity, and of the ordinary mess of being with humans intimately. The joke is about getting along in the face of something unlikely, after all. It's a test of who's in on the joke/project of love and who can't just get the project/joke. Love and jokes: tests of time and timing. But Brooks' jokes are gentle, like the heart, in that the form of conventionality holds you, sentimentally, while the affect splits off into surprises that take root and expand into vastly incoherent but not psychotic intensities of anger and pleasure, quietness and laughter, a space of fierce forgiveness at the mess of it all.

"No hard feelings" is what you say when you're leaving someone or a situation behind: "Hard Feelings" are the name for Brooks' aesthetics of the intimacy that binds.

¹David M. Halperin, "Sex before Sexuality: Pederasty, Politics, and Power in Classical Athens," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (New York: Plume, 1989), p. 49.

²Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, in James Strachey, trans. and ed. with Anna Freud. Vol. 8 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works (1905c.; London: Hogarth, 1953-74)*, 3-236.

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All artworks courtesy of the artist, Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.
www.stephaniebrooks.com

Stephanie Brooks

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Thursday, Oct. 11, to Saturday, Nov. 17, 2007

The Gahlberg Gallery/McAninch Arts Center would like to thank the writer, Lauren Berlant, and the artist, Stephanie Brooks, for their generous assistance and creativity in developing this publication.

Barbara Wiesen
Director and Curator



This program is partially supported by a grant
from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and by
The National Endowments for the Arts.



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