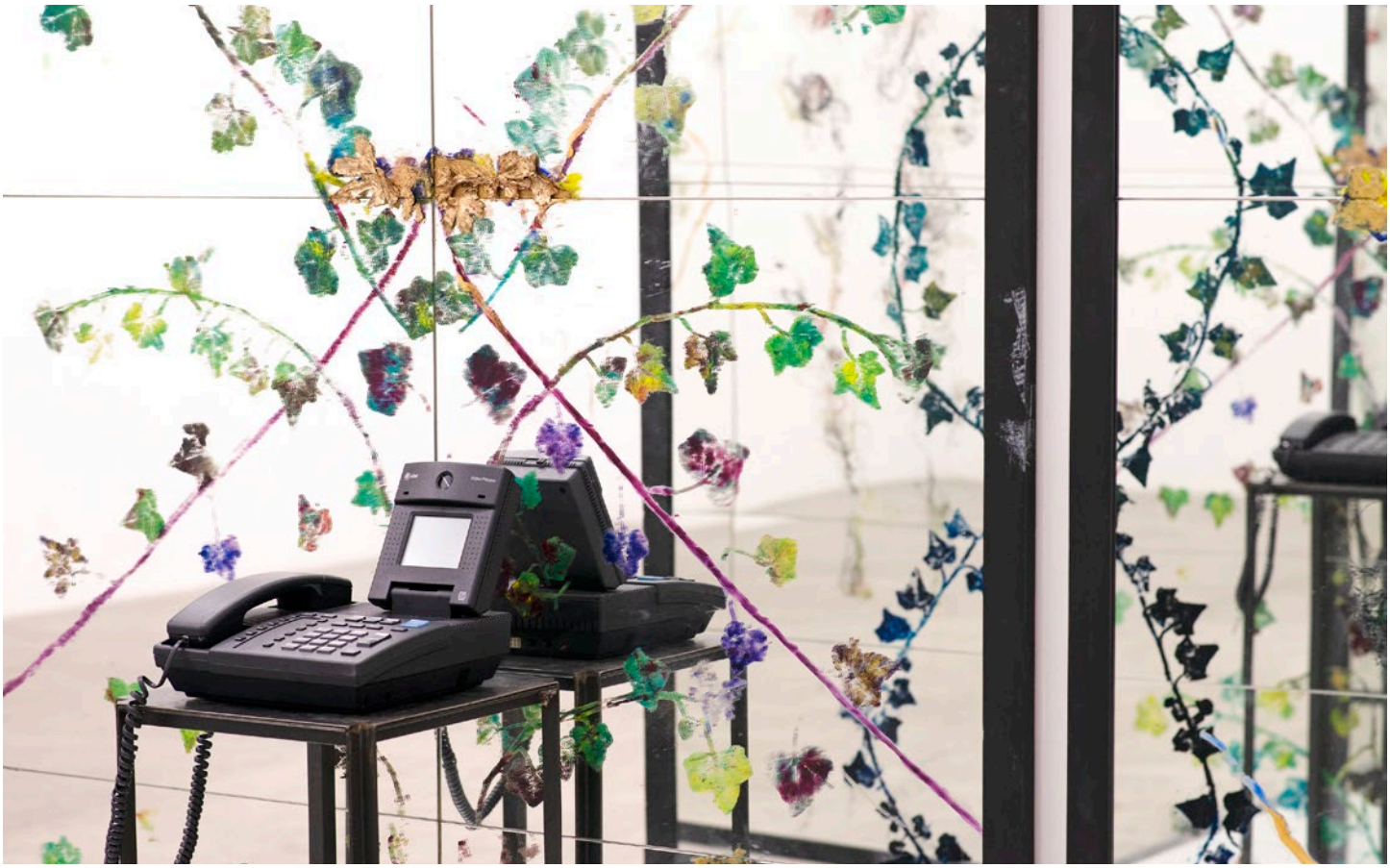
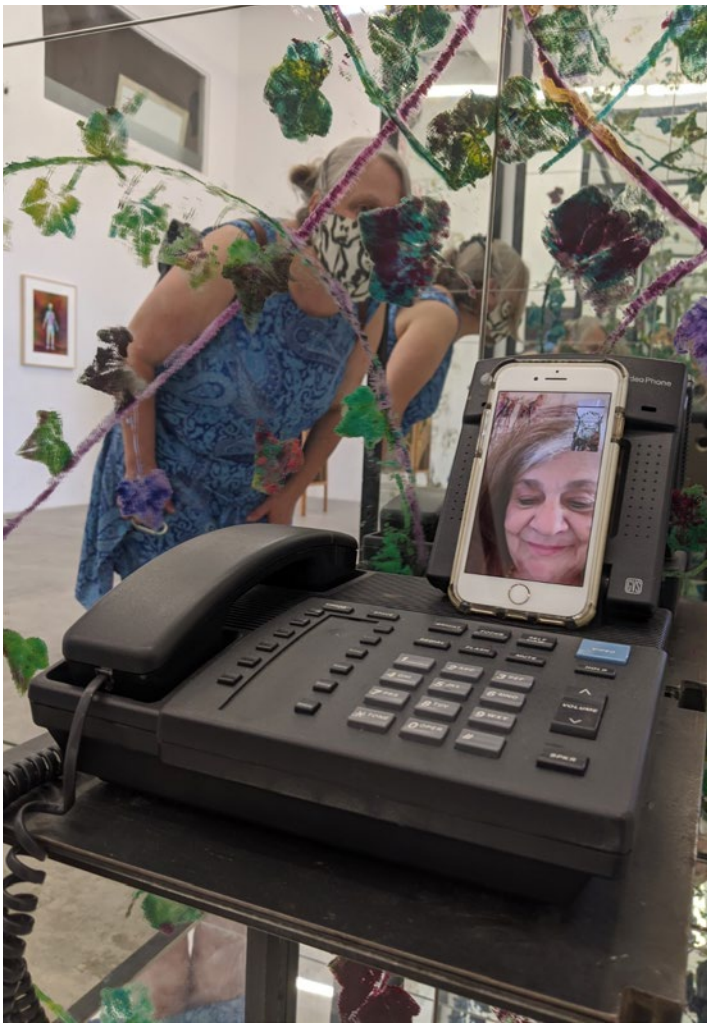
CALLING CARDS

By Rhiannon Vogl

It's summer 2020. Hot enough for me to wear shorts and a tank. I'm out walking in the west end of the city. My breath is damp, and it makes the cotton mask I'm wearing cling to my lips and chin. It's a bizarre feeling, to have my body be so exposed, soaking up the rays, and my face concealed, sticky with sweat. It's a sensation I don't yet know will soon feel so normal. I'm not wearing sunglasses, though—my eyes have been trained into such short-sighted focus lately that it feels good to let them train their gaze towards a distant horizon. I turn the corner on Dupont Street and reach my destination. It's a phonebooth, and I've come to call a sibyl, whose number hangs on a yellow Post-it note near the receiver. Apparently, she's waiting to chat.

Chrysanne Stathacos chooses her materials based on their psychic resonance. In her work, she brings together organic objects such as flower petals, cotton, flax, and hair to create spiritually attuned artworks that explore and expand her genealogical ties to Greece, America, and Canada; query the role of feminine archetypes in historical and contemporary mythologies; and act as social sculptures for collective and individual healing. For Stathacos, nature is a vehicle for compassion, art making is a vehicle for self-awareness, and the art object is a vehicle for interpersonal connection. Her over forty-year career is informed by various technologies of intuition—astrology, Tibetan Buddhism, ecofeminism, and the Tarot—as well as a deep commitment to materiality, narrative, and kinship. Her esoteric and empathetic approach to artmaking parallels her approach to the arts community at large; the matrilineage that can be traced back to Stathacos is vast. She has created countless opportunities and support structures for some of the country's most well-known artists and collectives, often acting as much as a facilitator as she does an artist. Her use of spirituality as a methodology evokes both an ancient and futuristic way of being in the world that has become all the more relevant to the social dynamic we find ourselves in today.





The phone booth that I am in doesn't have doors in the traditional sense, rather wings of mirror and metal that remain unfolded to either side. The cubicle where I'm making the call is, in fact, mirrored on all sides and floor, panels framed in black wood and standing just over eight feet tall. Delicate imprints of ivy vines and leaves in shades of jade and emerald scale the interior trellis work of this enclosure; a garden of indigo and aubergine rose stems traces the exterior, while mandalas of inked human tresses travel in tangles of maroon and gold through the centre. This filigree of organic elements entwines to and fro from reflective surface to reflective surface, as though entering a greenhouse of infinite depth and proportions. The black phone rests on a black table in the centre of the space, its buttons have high-contrast white lettering, and its face contains a rectangular LCD screen. There is no landline there, though. Instead of picking up the receiver, I pull out my own iPhone and open the FaceTime app. Stathacos is the oracle on the other side of the number I punch in.

Pg 12. Chrysanne Stathacos, *1-900 Mirror Mirror*, 1993-. Mirror, plexiglass, wood, videophone, steel table, hand printed hair, ivy, roses on mirror, dimensions variable. Installation view from "There are more than four," Cooper Cole, Toronto, Ontario (April 11 - June 27, 2020). Image courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole Gallery.

Pg 13, Top. Chrysanne Stathacos, *1-900 Mirror Mirror*, 1993-. Mirror, plexiglass, wood, videophone, steel table, hand printed hair, ivy, roses on mirror, dimensions variable. Installation view from "There are more than four," Cooper Cole, Toronto, Ontario (April 11 - June 27, 2020). Image courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole Gallery.

Pg 13, Bottom. Chrysanne Stathacos, *1-900 Mirror Mirror*, 1993-. Mirror, plexiglass, wood, videophone, steel table, hand printed hair, ivy, roses on mirror, dimensions variable. Installation view from "There are more than four," Cooper Cole, Toronto, Ontario (April 11 - June 27, 2020). Image courtesy of Judith Doyle.

Chrysanne Stathacos, *Rose Mandela*, 2018. Flowers, mirror, cannabis leaves, crystal, dimensions variable. Installation view of "Gold Rush," Cooper Cole, Toronto, Canada (December 15 - February 2, 2019).

The arch of Stathacos' career can be mapped across continents and contexts. Raised in Buffalo, New York, and Toronto, Ontario, she began her art studies at the Cleveland Institute of Art. After the massacres at Kent State in 1970, she returned to Toronto and studied printmaking at York University under Deli Sacilotto and Eugenio Tellez. Networked immediately into the community there, she was instrumental in the formation of the city's vibrant artist-run culture, co-founding and co-directing The Gap, a venue dedicated to performance art; and curating at A Space, one of the oldest artist-run centres in the country, where she organized the first cross-border exhibition between Hallwalls in Buffalo and A Space. She also spearheaded the seminal exhibition "Terminal Building," held in 1981 at The Clocktower Building at King and Bathurst. The iconic landmark had been a hive of artist and designers' live-work studios, yet these artists were evicted as the building was slated for demolition and the site for redevelopment. Stathacos was able to secure the exterior of an abandoned building for a public exhibition site that spring, inviting Paul Campbell, Wendy Knox-Leet, Rae Johnson, and General Idea (AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal) to produce ephemeral, site-specific installations in and around the building. For her part, Stathacos painted large-scale replicas of Greek columns in shades of emerald green that she hung from the clock tower like limp, ineffectual buttresses intended to keep its steeple erect. Notably, General Idea used this opportunity to activate the parking lot, creating *Toronto's Fault: The First Tremors (the ruins of the silver bar from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion)* (1981)—a vision of the building's future ruin, and a foreshadowing of the continued conflict between municipal governments, real estate development, and affordable studio/living space in the city.

Pondering the vastness of this infinite garden as I wait for my call to be answered, I start to sweat again. I don't yet know what I am going to say when Stathacos answers: What will I ask her? What will she say to me? Focusing instead on my eyes in the mirror in front of me, I also see the eyes in the back of my head, watching myself, examining myself. I've become part of the foliage here, entangled in the vines and blooms as they wrap around my own body, grow up and through my own hair. My phone beeps, and Stathacos' face appears on the screen, her own hair wild and wavy, her eyes bright and clear. "How are you today?" she asks warmly, and we make a few passing pleasantries about the weather and the state of the world. Sighing after our last comments about "these strange times," she looks straight into me and says, "What is it you would like to know?" My eyes well up immediately, and the light shifts in the garden, turning the plants into Rorschach inkblot tests and this glass cubicle into a confessional booth. "I need a sign from the universe," I say, with no attempt to hide my vulnerability. "I need to know things are going to be okay."

Her relationship with the members of General Idea was cemented during the early 1980s and was based both in a mutual respect for their concurrent practices as well as AA Bronson's shared interest in mysticism, oracles, Buddhism, and alternative healing methods. The artists eventually came to share a studio in New York City, while Stathacos continued to travel regularly between North America, Europe, and Greece to research and make work. Her affinities for performativity and storytelling lead her to birth Anne de Cybelle, a fictitious and fierce femme from nineteenth-century Paris who sets out to right the misogynist wrongs of the art historical canon. Stathacos used Anne as a way to craft an alternative identity but also to blur the boundaries between her art, life, and this more public persona, so much so that she convinced some critics to look for Anne in the depths of history books. Anne was also a medium through which Stathacos could experiment, as a parody but also a mode of self-reflection—a way to find and, to some extent, redefine herself in the world of contemporary art.

Anne began wearing dresses that Stathacos sewed and printed with patterns made with her own hair. Humorous at first, these traces of life soon became a way for the artist to collapse multiple times and places into a single narrative object. And while Anne faded in and out of Stathacos' career as needed, she inspired an increasing fragility and intimacy of the items Stathacos began working with—moving from hair to printing with glass, condoms, cannabis plants, and the clothing of other close friends. As the '90s wore on, Stathacos' production became as much about mysticism as it did about mourning—watching as many of her close circle succumbed to the highly contagious yet misunderstood AIDS pandemic. She began creating both relics and altars to those who had passed: paintings made by pressing objects belonging to lost friends onto canvas; magnificent mandalas of mirrored glass and live flowers that wilt, fade, and echo the fleetingness of life. The heightened anxiety around this new and then-untreatable disease prompted her to contemplate further the impermanence of the physical body and question what happens when the spirit leaves this vessel for the boundlessness of a place beyond. What could she do to both soothe and prepare others? How could she help them reflect?

I hold my phone down in front of me, watching Stathacos shuffle a deck of well-worn Tarot cards. "I am using the Tantric Dakini deck," she tells me as she folds the cards in and out together, her fingers working adeptly through the pile. "It is the same deck my good friend Robert Flack used. He passed away the year I made this work." She stops, closes her eyes and flips a card to face the screen. "There! This is a good one, number forty-six, Abundance!" She proceeds to read the interpretation from a dog-eared book, calming and softly reiterating all the things this card symbolizes. In this moment I feel more held and secure than I have in the past four months, holding space for calm amidst the chaos of the events unfolding outside this tiny decalled chamber. The cathartic experience of being sequestered within such an intimate space made of and for (self-)reflection, and of receiving both a nurturing and compassionate response to my anxiety, in the form of this sage advice, hit home at the time and place I needed it most. "You will certainly be okay," Stathacos reminds me as we hang up. I'm both emotionally wrung out and satiated.

Pg 16. Chrysanne Stathacos, *1-900 Mirror Mirror*, 1993-. Mirror, plexiglass, wood, videophone, steel table, hand printed hair, ivy, roses on mirror, dimensions variable. Installation view with Frank and Julie at Andrea Rosen Gallery (1993). Photography by Maxine Henryson. Image courtesy of the artist.

Pg 17. Chrysanne Stathacos, *1-900 Mirror Mirror*, 1993-. Mirror, plexiglass, wood, videophone, steel table, hand printed hair, ivy, roses on mirror, dimensions variable. Installation view at Andrea Rosen Gallery (1993). Photography by Maxine Henryson. Image courtesy of the artist.

Stathacos first exhibited *1-900 Mirror Mirror* at Andrea Rosen Gallery in 1993. At that time, the phone inside the booth was of the highest technological capacity—a telephone that also had allowed its users to see their fellow interlocutor via video screen. Audience members were encouraged to dial in, and the artist would speak to them one-on-one, conduct a Tarot reading, and find some form of solace amidst the escalating AIDS pandemic. Foretelling in more ways than one, the artist was retrieving it from storage in New York in early March 2020 when the reality of COVID-19 was starting to blanket the continent. She was slated to install it at Cooper Cole Gallery in Toronto, in a group exhibition curated by Jacob Korczynski, which had been planned several months in advance. Neither coincidence nor serendipity can express the uncanny timeliness of this planning; no one could have anticipated showing it again amidst the height of another pandemic, nor the full extent of mediation we would all be experiencing at this point between ourselves and the screen. The exhibition was installed and then closed to in-person viewership until two weeks before its official finishing date in June. It was the first online vernissage I attended, and I also became a regular at the online group readings and meditations Stathacos hosted as part of the gallery's pivoted programming. When galleries were permitted to reopen to the public, it was also the first I returned to.

Stathacos' commitment to social practice is exemplified in the way she creates these spaces to contain worries and dread but also to release, to reflect, to set one's mind at ease. The tarot and the telephone are only two tools she uses to reach out, to communicate, to share vibration—psychic or soundwave—with another waiting on the other side. This creation of collective community, based both in the material and immaterial realm, is grounded in her belief in that which is materially and immaterially based, traceable to the physical realm but tethered to something beyond. The illusiveness of prediction and permanence is knotted throughout her practice, an entwinement not easily loosened, even with the finest toothed comb. Back in lockdown again, my eyes twitch rhythmically in response to the time they've spent absorbing blue light. Training them for a break, outside my window, I watch a gnarly bramble of vines cling in the wind to my neighbour's garage door. Still green, it knots its way persistently along the building, and watching its persistent foliage makes me think it might just be time again to phone a friend.

Rhiannon Vogl lives and studies in Toronto, where she is an active member of the visual arts and endurance running community. Vogl has written for Momus Magazine, Canadian Art Magazine, Border Crossings, BlackFlash *and* Phaidon Press.