

On Emilia González Salgado and Michelle Lee Johnson's
force with no net sum (2023, 2025; 2026; installation, scent and manual)

a response by Lu Rose Cunningham

A *force with no net sum*, a balanced force, the object remaining so, as constant kinetic energy. Amounting in a static equilibrium, the manual before me will rest on the table, until I decide to move it.

Emilia González Salgado and Michelle Lee Johnson's collaborative work *force with no net sum* (2023, 2025) is an ongoing event, first in the form of installation to then continue living as a distilled scent - an archive of the installation - and a manual, the conceptual constant between all forms. Presented first in London in 2023 at Hartslane Gallery, the work was a smaller, simpler iteration utilising a small stainless steel condenser and Screwfix extractor fan to attempt a flow of particulate matter, inevitably only functioning to present a conceptual idea. From this though they grew a more extensive understanding of mechanical systems, to then exhibit again in 2025 at INDUSTRA Gallery - a former manufacturing site in Brno, Czech Republic - an artwork of machinery and hand-blown glass vessels, which condensed the atmosphere of a space into a liquid that carries its accumulated scent over time. The site-specific, durational system processed the air - condensing humidity, sweat, breath, and other residues - into hydrosol captured. This output functioned as fluid-based documentation, archiving a space over time through scent.



Emilia González Salgado & Michelle Lee Johnson, Exhibition view, *force with no net sum*, 2025.
Image credit: Matilde Araoz Ellis

A body in space is a singular unit until it decides to move through or is encouraged/directed/ reckoned with. A body that exhales out particles, particles once contained and now existing with others. A body of vibrations and utterance encountering another, two units with two reasons. Two practitioners, a collaboration that questions how we occupy [art] spaces, how bodies are present in these spaces, how bodies and site impact upon the other.

Emilia González Salgado and Michelle Lee Johnson are such collaborators. Salgado's practice investigates expanded notions of objects and space through scent; scent compelling intimate interactions with objects, blurring the boundaries between the object, its environment, and the body of the observer. Johnson in conjunction explores the politics imbued in our affective relations to nonhumans and spaces, both public and private, as a method to uncover social constructs and systems of value. Emilia and Michelle's practice finds itself situated at the porous juncture between body and place, with transformative knowledge produced in the trans-corporeal encounters within the world.** Machinery meeting sweat beads, distillation of one's breath, one's skin-scent, the fragrance of touch/reach/memorialising another. Surfaces, skin, a contact point, metal swarf, dust, a percolator scent in the next room, exhalation penetrating and captured, olfactory mediums extended via liquid form as sculpture, sign, gesture.

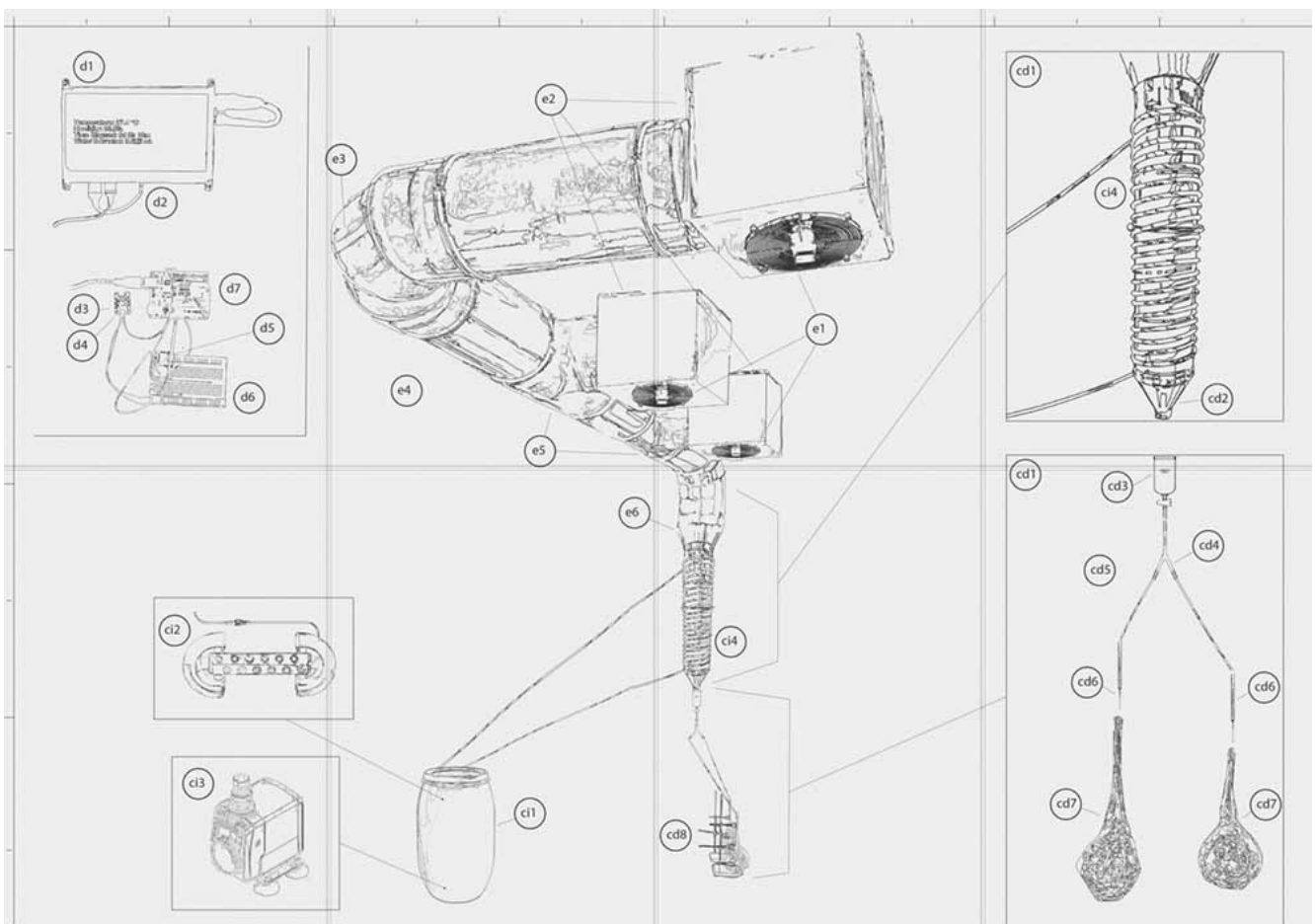
Occurring prior to this year, the site-specific work no longer exists as the aforementioned installation, but rather as the captured scent from the installation's glass vials and now also as a manual created this year, both an attempt to capture the essence of a place over time, the soul of a happening. One might call this continuation of place via scent and manual an afterlife.

The manual, replete in machinery-infused jargon, instructional and exact, with delicate hand-drawn diagrams on the reverse, reads,

'input - what enters a system'.

'output - what is produced by a system'.

'extraction system - where air and humidity are pulled and directed'.*



Emilia González Salgado & Michelle Lee Johnson, Manual, *force with no net sum*, 2026.

Though this, a sense of navigating, migration, gathering. I consider my own constant propulsion towards business, intermingling with others via labour and socialisation. Sometimes at the mercy of others, of the city, the necessity to work, the inherent encounters. How we impact upon another; a 'condensation system - where humidity changes states to a liquid'.* A condensing, distilling, re-presenting. A culmination, a noticing of one's essence recognised in a place but drawn to another. Figures, fragrances, phrasing meet; 'data system - how information is collected, recorded, and displayed'.*

There are live readings happening, a calculation of presence. I wonder if my breath would amount to much, if the temperature sensor would detect changes in the space when this motioning body comes into contact with such circulation system, if I am considered a circulating system of one's own. In this heatwave I write during, I imagine my breath hotter, ragged, attempting to pervade despite languidity. Wonder whether the Arduino board's current would be higher with my self-awareness heightened in the warmer climate, my out-breath adding moisture to the air, vibrating at ultrasonic frequencies, condensed humidity converted into liquid. I am not a scientist nor engineer, but note a parallel in circuitry systems to those of a people, this body of work an intriguing - machine-led - anthropological enquiry. I am distributable, noting my sweat beads evaporate from the back of my hand, slicked off and pulled into another strata.

Much like the sculptural entity of the initial iteration, the manual is something to be engaged with, with arguably further tactility. Whilst the distillation device required the sweat, fragrances, notes of a place and those passing through it to be activated - the site it sat in as fertile ground - the manual simply requires a reader to open up a physical and dialogic mapping, streamlining the industrial artwork to something that is mobile and can be re-acquainted with - reopened and refolded, language compartmentalised, distilled. A poem per images of diagrammatic loops and links.

I recall here *The Dynamo and the Virgin* chapter from *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), how Henry Adams saw the dynamo (machinery) as not only a channel for conveying the heat latent in coal, but of potential, of conducting, of shifting states, symbolic. This murmuring machine, not so human as some but expressive, human-like. Transmogrifying, the time-based animated mechanics unfold as a form of theatre, with manual as notational score, an active archive of the machine's performance. The condensed matter then condensed again, from fragmented gas to coalescing liquid, to a solid legible text.

In thinking about the closeness of the viewer within the installation — unwillingly participating as their sweat and particles are collected into the artwork, intervening without cognition - and the reader to manual, of an event contained within pages, there comes a sense of closeness, of intervention. What it means to navigate something, to be part of a system. It is a conversation of decisions and possible choices or lack of. The manual is effective here, echoing the work it stems from which asks what it means to reside in a place, to operate within a specific - here, exhibition - environment, the discomfort of entering new spaces with existing factors. I feel at times uncertainty when following the specific lexicon printed, the routes taken from breath to glass distilling vessel - the role of engaging with/towards/after something or someone new. How we hold another presence.

There lies a keen appreciation of the tenuous line between (institutional) care and control, how we enter into and respond, reorient, act. Our bodies are susceptible. Such volatility serves as a reminder of the instability of arbitrary systems and spaces we invest ourselves in deeply. The work emerges transitional, and I think how many breaths are contained, held only by a glass membrane - shatterable at worst - and see the precariousness of the body, acknowledging the influence of the environment. A sensuous entity of living matter, of glass/ metal/ vapour signalling to energy and fatigue, labour and time passing. A process of processing a site and bodies; the apparatus the same, the social constantly changing.

The liquid output (in the vessels) is,

'impacted by the gallery hours but is not contingent on being viewed. While the audience becomes an additional variable, the system runs independently of and non-exclusively from

human-based inputs. Boundaries are trespassed by residues circulating throughout the space and the 'bodies' that enter it. The liquid becomes evidence to our inherent condition of permeability to complicate notions of enclosure... the machine distills a space without judgement.*

The duo deftly question the presumption of 'art spaces' as isolated from other domestic and work places, asking how bodies experience such 'maintained' sites, what residues they leave behind, what persists as spatial conditions are lost to time. The artists - in breathing into the space just as other audience members and particulate matter do - become part of the collective, a possible hierarchy collapsed. As ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose writes on permeability, 'place penetrates the body, and the body slips into place'.***



Emilia González Salgado & Michelle Lee Johnson, detail, *force with no net sum*, 2025.

The manual follows the work, collapsing the machine's impressive nature down to something more gently accessed. Of course, the manual is also the product of machine-means, only smaller, 'bringing the sculpture back into a language of production while problematising [an] understanding of functionality within art spaces.* Human to non-human conversations, fingertip to pencil to paper and keyboard, typesetting to printing, screen to ink, then a folding, by hand. Inhale exhale in time with the sigh of a printing tray shifting into gear. It is a recognisable and transportable mode, a more tender representation of the machine-non-human-human dynamic Michelle and Emilia respond to.

There is something to be said about the manual as a practical, but also intricate, portrait of something often considered robust and cold in feeling. Visual art can often reject functionality; Michelle and Emilia challenge this assumed stance, querying how functionality can occupy arts spaces, the manual and machine the results of material decisions based on conceptual concerns. I consider the choice of something small, an object that can sit close to us, meld to the shape of our pocket. The site is compiled into something proximate, much like the original installation, reiterating the artists' engagement with proximity, understanding systems - mechanic and fleshed alike.

Reading the diagram I discover how the glass vessels for collecting the hydrosol are shaped by the imprint of each artists' mouth - born of the artists' own forms and existences in a time and place. The vessels acknowledge not only the audience whose particular output gathers inside, but the artists' identities too, akin to self-portraits, succinctly 'foregrounding the body as a tool for making'* and gesturing towards collaborative exchanges throughout. Manual and vessel here present themselves as quiet placeholders of liveness - one, a collection of data, the other a reading of the collected - and lengthy processes that insist on attentiveness, temporality and something or someone to witness and engage with.

force with no net sum is a sensorial, purposeful and emotive work that readily shares the research areas of both practitioners. It enacts the very tenants of artistry; an attempt at seeing, feeling and knowing. Looking at the machine diagram, I see how each component is linked, from extractor fan to rigid ducting, to condensation column and glass dropper pipets, to the hand blown glass perfume bottles. All one unit that can't be separated without the process ceasing, relying on togetherness. It implores connectivity. By connecting, one relocates consciousness in the body and where we situate ourselves, forging a potential future of co-belonging, an act of testimony.



Emilia González Salgado & Michelle Lee Johnson, detail, *force with no net sum*, 2025.

* quotes from the 2026 manual of *force with no net sum*

** for further reading, see Stacy Alaimo's writings on the concept of transcorporeality

*** Debora Bird Rose, *Dialogue with Place: Toward an Ecological Body*, *Journal of Narrative Theory* 32, no. 3, (202), p. 312