

STUDIO VISIT ([HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/SERIES/STUDIO-VISIT/](https://bombmagazine.org/series/studio-visit/))

## David L. Johnson

Sculpture that reimagines the public-private divide.

BY LOUIS BURY ([HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/AUTHOR/LOUIS-BURY](https://bombmagazine.org/author/louis-bury/))

JANUARY 11, 2023



([https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/\\_hiresolution/David-L-Johnson1\\_2023-04-22-113925\\_algl.jpg](https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/David-L-Johnson1_2023-04-22-113925_algl.jpg))

All photos by Louis Bury.

The spiky and rusted welded-metal objects that line one wall of David L. Johnson's basement studio exude defiant charisma. Part of the artist's *Loiter* series (2020–present), each artwork was originally designed to prevent New York City pedestrians from sitting on structures such as standpipes and windowsills. Johnson has been extracting from the city this species of so-called hostile architecture as a gesture of guerrilla urbanism. The gesture's impetus is practical (to allow people to sit) and conceptual ("to make forms of social life visible through removal," he explains) more than it is aesthetic. But the resultant sculptures are powerful in their own right, recalling the guardedness of Melvin Edwards's *Lynch Fragments* (1963–present) and conveying a sense of personality (each work has been subtitled with the first name of its former property owner) through their quirky, decontextualized forms.



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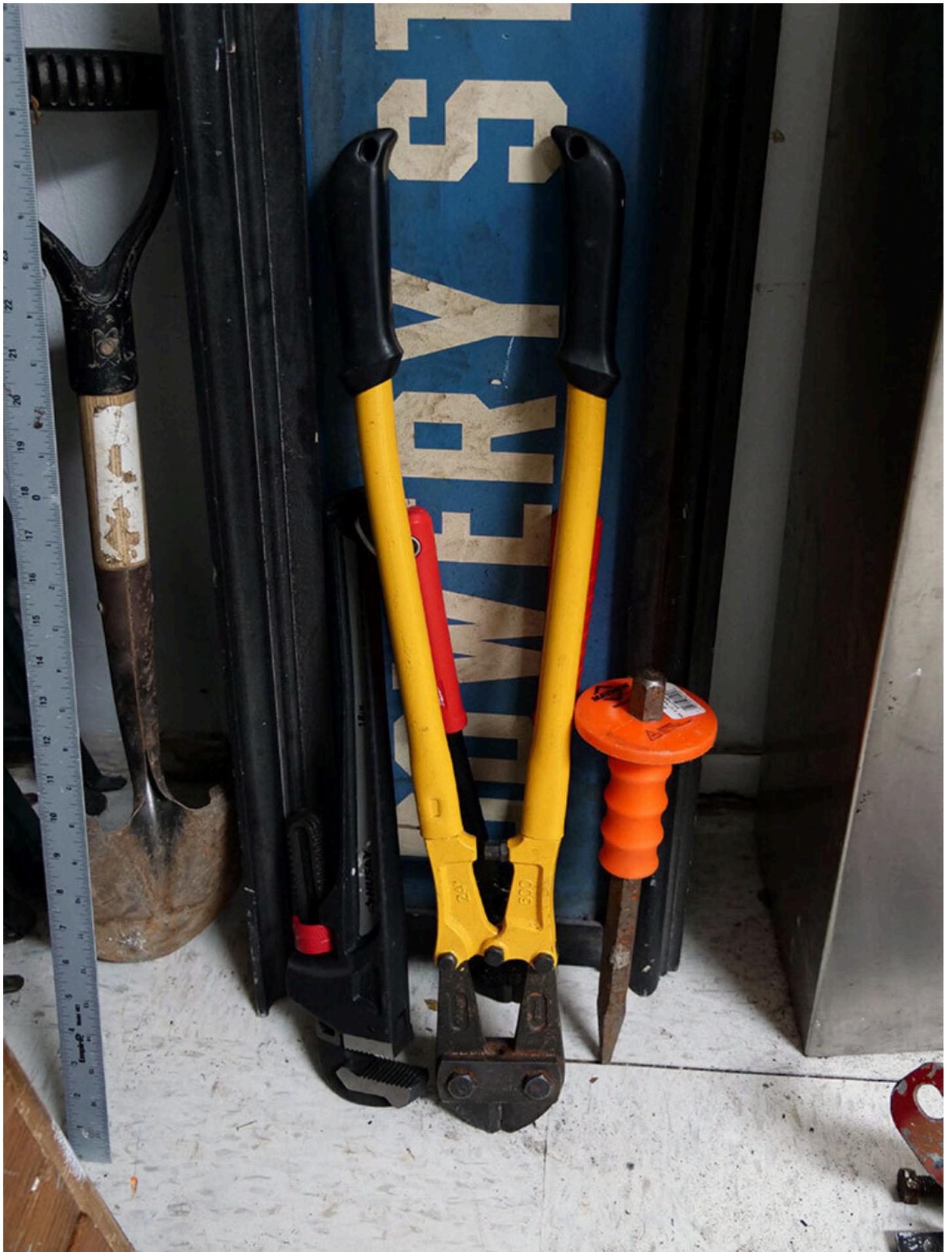




Just as hostile architecture can elude citizens' notice, the physical labor behind Johnson's sharp, cerebral practice can go overlooked. He works in the tradition of artist flâneurs, such as Yuji Agematsu, who enjoy the practice of walking for its own sake yet also discover materials and inspiration while out on foot. Johnson's studio, which is located in the narrow, rent-stabilized Manhattan apartment in which he grew up and continues to live, functions in part as a repository for his finds, whose artistic usages may take time to become apparent. The stack of discarded NYPD event posters next to his computer desk, for example, hasn't yet been incorporated into a project, while a nearby dislocated, metal property-line plaque comes from his *Adverse Possessions* series (2022–present). He developed the series when he noticed one such plaque loosened from a midtown Manhattan sidewalk, which prompted him to research the legal concept of adverse possession, or "squatter's rights." Removing property-line plaques requires Johnson to keep nocturnal hours and employ safety precautions akin to those of graffiti artists; he jokes that working this way likely takes more labor than it would to weld the sculptures from scratch.











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A sense of principled reluctance, informed by the work of poet-theorists such as Édouard Glissant and Fred Moten, underpins Johnson's practice. His work eschews direct representation of civic life, presenting instead its deconstructed territorial traces and associated documentary record. Even his video and photographic depictions of New York City birds and plants, which have an austere, Warholian charm, are mediated by commercial real estate's look-but-don't-touch windows. "Plants and animals don't abide by human boundaries," Johnson elaborates, similar to how "art has the ability to be naive" when it comes to reimagining the public-private divide. As we discuss the personal and impersonal histories of the objects populating his studio—from the tools he uses to perform his artistic interventions to the washer-dryer he and his partner use for laundry—it occurs to me that I wouldn't describe any of them as possessions.





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**IMMEDIATE ACTION NEEDED:  
TELL THE CITY THAT A SOARING SLIVER  
TOWER DOES NOT BELONG MIDBLOCK**

**OUR CHARMING 19TH-CENTURY STREETScape IS IN  
JEOPARDY ALONG WITH ACCESS TO LIGHT, AIR AND  
VIEWS**

A developer is seeking a variance to build this 155-foot high, 15-story, midblock monstrosity, at 157 West 24th Street, where a 4-story building once stood

As the Chelsea Land Use Committee writes this proposed building "does not architecturally fit into the context of the block... (and has the) potential for altering the character of the neighborhood and having a detrimental impact on nearby buildings."

We agree and don't want to live in this building's shadows. Neighbors, tell the New York City Board of Standards and Appeals (BSA) to deny this variance. This structure is simply too big, for a tiny midblock lot on West 24th Street. Let BSA know street visuals matter and consistent rooflines matter.

Residents and businesses have had enough of the constant construction that comes with such oversized and out-of-place towers.

Email the BSA by March 15 to Deny This Variance. Be sure to include these key details:  
Calendar number: 2021-40-BZ  
Address: 157 West 24th Street  
submit@bsa.nyc.gov

For more information contact: w24thstreetba@gmail.com



6-768-7771

TIME: 3-5

EVENTS & CONDITIONS UNKNOWN

USE LOCATION

# OF PIECES: 10

UP LABOR	DELIVER LABOR
HOURS	HOURS
MIN	MIN

CHINA CARTON OTHER  
COMM. BIN OTHER  
NEWSPRINT OTHER  
TISSUE OTHER  
OTHER OTHER

DATE: 5-6-22



David L. Johnson's work can be seen in the group exhibition [Life Between Buildings](https://www.momaps1.org/programs/1-life-between-buildings) (<https://www.momaps1.org/programs/1-life-between-buildings>) at MoMA PS1 in New York City until January 16.

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Louis Bury is the author of *Exercises in Criticism* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2015) and *The Way Things Go* (punctum books, forthcoming 2023). He is Associate Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY, and contributes regularly to *Hyperallergic* and *Art in America*.

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