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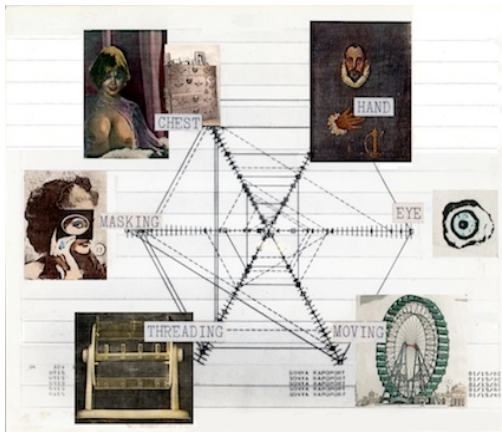
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Spaces of Life: The Art of Sonya Rapoport January 18 – March 11, 2012

Oakland, CA – December 15, 2011. The Mills College Art Museum is pleased to announce *Spaces of Life: The Art of Sonya Rapoport*, a solo exhibition of Rapoport's works created between 1979-2011.

Recognized for her early embrace of computer technology, in the mid 1970's, and participatory web-based works, Rapoport presents new works alongside earlier ones in an all encompassing installation that fuses the spaces of the museum with the energy of the artist's Berkeley home and studio. Rapoport's work has long operated as a bridge between the public sphere of intellectual curiosity and scholarship and the domestic one of spiritual inquiry and nurturing.

Central to the installation of Rapoport's work at MCAM is *Objects on My Dresser* (1979-1983), an 11-phase work intended as a kind of conceptual visit to the artist's home and studio. The titular dresser, which has occupied Rapoport's foyer for decades, is installed along with the original objects that sparked her investigation of the connections between symbols, words and ideas. Documentation of "netweb plots" created by Rapoport and by visitors to installations of previous project phases is included along with new plots created with Mills students. The Mills plot includes images, correlative images and words determined by the participants, in advance of the exhibition, and is on display for visitors to manipulate and customize according to their own, personal associations.



Other works presented in *Spaces of Life* take the form of documentation of original interactive installations, domestic objects that provide a launching pad for interactions, and new interpretations of the works' systems of interaction. Rapoport's work continues to be influenced by a range of disciplines including technology, biochemistry, anthropology, psychology, and feminist studies. Visitors to *Spaces of Life* are encouraged to engage in ongoing, distributed performance actions that draw on these influences and related imagery.

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Sonya Rapoport is a distinguished artist whose sixty-year career spans painting, works on paper, interactive installations and digital works. Rapoport's approach to art making is naturally diverse, underpinned by her pioneering use of scientific and social science research as the basis for a conceptual practice. Her work reveals deep philosophical and psychological perspectives, humor, expression, and creativity, which she brings to such topical concerns as gender, religion, politics, bioengineering, and the role of technology in contemporary life explored through interactive processes, systems and media.

Curated by Terri Cohn and Anuradha Vikram.

Image: Sonya Rapoport, *Objects on My Dresser: Tansu*, 1979-1983

Image: Sonya Rapoport, *White Space Conflict: Netweb Plot*, 1983

Spaces of Life: The Art of Sonya Rapoport is supported by the Agnes Cowles Bourne Fund for Special Exhibition and the Helzel Family Foundation.

SPACES OF LIFE RELATED PROGRAMS

Opening Reception & Curator Walk-Through

Wednesday, January 18, 2012, 6:00-8:00 pm

Objects on My Dresser: Artist Talk and Performance

Sunday, February 12, 2012, 1-3pm

With Sonya Rapoport, Dr. Revathi Vikram, psychiatrist, and audience members.

Pre-Release Book Launch: Pairing of Polarities: The Life and Art of Sonya Rapoport, edited by Terri Cohn

Wednesday, March 7, 2012, 7pm

With Malcolm Margolin of Heyday Press.

-end-

Founded in 1925, **The Mills College Art Museum** is a forum for exploring art and ideas and a laboratory for contemporary art practices. Through innovative exhibitions, programs, and collections, the museum engages and inspires the intellectual and creative life of the Mills community as well as the diverse audiences of the Bay Area and beyond.

Nestled in the foothills of Oakland, California, **Mills College** is a nationally renowned, independent liberal arts college offering a dynamic progressive education that fosters leadership, social responsibility, and creativity to approximately 950 undergraduate women and 550 graduate women and men. The College ranks as one of the *Best 376 Colleges* in the country and one of the greenest colleges in the nation by The Princeton Review. *U.S. News & World Report* ranked Mills one of the top-tier regional universities in the country and second among colleges and universities in the West in its "Great Schools, Great Prices" category.

For more information and images, contact Maysoun Wazwaz at 510. 430.3340 or mwazwaz@mills.edu. Museum hours are Tuesday-Sunday 11:00–4:00 pm and Wednesday 11:00–7:30 pm. Admission is free for all exhibitions and programs unless noted.

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Spaces of Life: The Art of Sonya Rapoport
by Terri Cohn and Anuradha Vikram

“Always container, sometimes contained, the house serves...as the portal to metaphors of imagination...Chests, especially small caskets, over which we have more complete mastery, are objects that may be opened. What immensities flow from objects that may be opened...Out of the house spin worlds within worlds...”

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1)

The concept of “home” is in some ways a uniquely human notion. All creatures seek shelter, yet none has made the construction of personal space as central to its evolutionary trajectory as we. The shapes of our private spaces inform our understanding of human relationships in profound ways. Sonya Rapoport has long explored these questions, opening the realm of private thought to public discussion through a body of work based in systems of information and social and spatial organization.

In *Spaces of Life*, Rapoport applies interactive processes and systems of analysis to objects and experiences emanating from her domestic life—inserting herself into those systems and inviting others to join her in participation. Her early works subjected everyday domestic forms, such as the doors of her house or objects on her dresser, to rigorous analysis, while the recent conceptual portrait series of her nuclear family considers the Cold War through a personal lens. Rapoport consistently makes analogies between the actual spaces and details of her home and her own psycho-emotional and intellectual spaces, as well as places of significance from her past, connected to her husband, children and grandchildren.

Throughout her career, Rapoport has returned to an idea of her house that is similar to the critic Gaston Bachelard’s description of living space as “the portal to metaphors of imagination.” (2) Her eleven-part series *Objects on My Dresser* (1979-1983) was initially triggered by the desire to systematize and archive the random set of objects that accumulated on her dresser over two decades. Through this process, she came to an understanding of her sense of loss over the recent death of her mother. Most importantly, she created broad analogies between her life and others’ by mapping this emotional, tangible, and very personal space within her own home.

The Dresser—a Tansu chest—is at the center of a network of meanings, and the embodiment of her series’ power. Bachelard also recognizes this symbolic potential, writing “chest, especially small casket over which we have more complete mastery, are objects that may be opened. What immensities flow from objects that may be opened.” (3) Rapoport opens and unpacks the psychological space of her dresser in a systematic and translatable way. *Objects on My Dresser* is her study of the immensities that emanate from everyday objects, subjected to psychoanalysis via an exercise in

associative word-image relationships. This becomes the basis for multiple thematic evolutions and public interactions that document evolving responses to the objects and their connective associations.

A key element of *Objects on My Dresser* is the participation of a psychiatrist, who helps to contextualize word-image associations within an understanding of systems of emotional and social cognition. As analogies are made—for example between an object (oval glass tray) and an image (photograph of a countess holding a frame), linked by the assigned words (“See Thru”)—the psychiatrist interprets each participant’s choices. As such, the work functions as a collective experiment, effectively creating a portrait of the individual experiences within a crowd. Rapoport’s interest in psychoanalysis is linked to the ongoing inquiry into the science of mind that informed both the Surrealists’ and the Abstract Expressionists’ understanding of individual artistic process. Her metaphysical questioning speaks to the “potential” that streams from Bachelard’s objects.

At the time she created her related work, *Doors of My House* (1978), Rapoport had been utilizing computer database analyses of Native American archaeological sites as the basis for a series of works. Here she turns that investigation toward her own physical surroundings. She begins with a study of the doors of her house in its current configuration, then researches architectural plans to see where the doors had originally been built, and which of them had been changed, covered over, or added. She becomes interested in the attributes of the 42 doors, such as opacity, size, functionality, hardware, and the reasons for their location in the house. Rapoport then creates programs to plot this data. Using Cal Comp plotters on vellum, the artist superimposes the computer printouts with Xerox copies from photographs of the doors, then draws or types text directly onto the continuous forms of the data printouts. A related work, *Chinaware* (1978), unpacks another chest—the sideboard—to consider the investment in porcelain as a form of emotional security, crucial to the well-appointed home.

Rapoport’s attention to the particulars of her home reflects her condition as a mid-century wife and mother, charged with maintaining domestic space and with it the very sustenance of her brood. In *Brutal Myths* (1996), she considers the double-edge of that role, drawing on the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Witch Hammer), a medieval witch-hunting text that accused women of abusing their role as caregivers to secretly poison men with malevolent herbs. Related web works, *Make Me a Man* (1997), *Make Me a Superman* (2008), and *Brutal Kicks* (1996/2009) extend this investigation of the duality of women’s role as caregivers and the lengths to which societies will go to “protect” men from women’s feminizing influence. The practices associated with these myths form the basis for our modern science of Botanical Chemistry, the area of specialization chosen by two scientists in Rapoport’s immediate family, her husband Henry and daughter Hava. Again, the circle of family connections becomes complete.

Rapoport’s analysis of maternal responsibility and legacy extends to the works *Horizontal Cobalt* (1979), *July Journal* (1970s), and *Nuclear Family* (2011), which are based on photographs and records of collective family experiences. Rapoport, a

descendant of Russian Jews, raised her children in the shadow of the Cold War, in which her ancestral homeland became the dreaded Soviet “menace.” While U.C. Berkeley acted as her family’s academic and intellectual home, it was also the site of Lawrence Livermore Labs, where the science and design of weapons of mass destruction was in full thrust. As the wife of an academic, Rapoport had a global context rare for people of her generation, traveling widely with her husband in the 1970s and receiving red-carpet treatment in such places as Iran and India that have since undergone remarkable change. That international perspective is more commonly shared today with the advent of digital communications and widespread commercial aviation. The artist’s archives of personal history, contained within her home—her personal cabinet of wonders—become the stuff of collective memory. Those memories infuse the spaces of life that Rapoport creates.

As a modern family, the Rapoports had by the early 1980s acquired another kind of portal in their home. For Sonya, the personal computer represents an additional psychologically laden space within the home, one that can potentially be used to make universal connections. It is an instantaneous path from one “home” to another, allowing us to virtually rifle through Rapoport’s chests of drawers filled with information about mythology, history, science and art. The possibilities for connections that arise from these interactions are limitless.

What makes a house a home? It would seem that this question could not be answered through material forms alone, but Rapoport seeks understanding through the tangible elements of her domestic domain. The manner in which she consistently systematizes her domestic spaces again evokes Bachelard’s idea that “every house is first a geometrical object of planes and right angles...but how such rectilinearity so welcomes human complexity, idiosyncrasy, how the house adapts to its inhabitants,”(4) and how “inhabited space transcends geometrical space.” (5) Rapoport, working as a Systems Conceptual artist, maps her house in a geometrical, mathematical way, and analyzes its content from those perspectives. Yet ultimately, the stories and experiences of the lives lived in those spaces trump formal or mathematical analysis.

(1) Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994) p. ix

(2) *Ibid*, p. viii

(3) *Ibid*.

(4) John R. Stilgoe, Foreword in Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, p. vii

(5) *Ibid*, p.vii

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Spaces of Life: The Art of Sonya Rapoport

Through March 11



Better for you, better for the planet.

8% of California's electricity is used for indoor cannabis. Consider high-potency sungrown. An endless range of flavors available everyday.



The installations and PowerPoint slideshows of conceptual artist Sonya Rapoport are again on view, this time at Mills College. In the psychoanalytic "Objects on My Dresser" she considers the 29 objects deposited on her dresser over two decades and the associations they provoked. "4. Last Supper Dresser/Spiritual," for example, yields the enigmatic "Sea Snakes/Slithery." "Psycho-Aesthetic Dynamic" is a floor-mounted web of images divided into sectors by axes -- labeled Hand, Chest, Eye, Masking, Threading, and Moving -- accompanied by objects and collages mounted on surrounding walls. Rapoport's PowerPoint pieces combine Lichtenstein Pop paintings, A-bomb terminology in English and Russian, and casual snapshots of her nuclear family; pieces on the famous hybrids Jocko and BarackO muse on the social construction of gender identity; others treat historical misogyny and male hysteria. Don't miss the pamphlet by curators Terri Cohn and Anuradha Vikram. *Spaces of Life* runs through March 11 at MillsCollegeArt Museum (5000 MacArthur Blvd., Oakland). 510-430-2164 or MCAM.Mills.edu

— DeWitt Cheng

Mills College Art Museum

5000 MacArthur Blvd.

OAKLAND-EAST

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"OBJECTS ON MY DRESSER: TANSU," 1979/1983
Sonya Rapoport, TANSU DRESSER WITH FOUND OBJECTS

OAKLAND

Sonya Rapoport: "Spaces of Life" at Mills College Art Museum

Artist Sonya Rapoport, whose work spans more than six decades, was clearly ahead of her time, pursuing a unique vision wherein whimsical imagery, personal narrative and feminist content mesh with materials and methodology drawn from the dawning computer age and the realm of scientific research. Rapoport met her husband, Henry, when he was a PhD candidate at MIT. A job as professor of Organic Chemistry at UC Berkeley later drew the pair to Northern California, where Sonya studied in the Department of Art, Practice, under Earl Loran, graduating in 1949. While not a collaboration in the traditional sense, Rapoport's immersion in the processes and language of experimentation and academic rigor clearly shaped her path as an artist, suggesting to her the unusual and ground-breaking use of the computer, the internet and the adoption of objective forms of analysis and quantification to investigate her highly subjective themes.

"Spaces of Life," co-curated by Terri Cohn and Anuradha Vikram, focuses on a 30-year slice of the artist's work. *Objects on My Dresser* (1979 - 1983) presents 29 objects which Rapoport, along with a psychiatrist, analyzed for their significance in her life. The original objects were correlated with a secondary set of images, printed on cards. For example, an erotic Indian miniature (love), was matched

with a movie promo still for vampire flick "Love at First Bite" (sex). This work has spiraled off into an ongoing project involving several interactive installations. Much of the wall-mounted work on display utilizes continuous feed computer paper — "pin-feed paper"—popular in the early age of printers. *Horizontal Cobalt* (1979) presents text alongside quirky images of animals, skeletons, flowers, religious symbols and alchemical tables, in transfer and colored pencil, suggesting ideas of the spiritual versus the secular and of transmutation, layered over a computer printout describing the reaction when the cobalt atom is split by nuclear bombardment. A pair of video installations, *Make Me a Superman* (2009) and *Brutal Kicks* (1996-2009), update web-based projects, injecting contemporary musings on provocative subject matter of gender, race and abuse, and using the themes of witchcraft and misogyny to reflect on how the disparate upbringings of African Americans Barack Obama and Michael Jackson served to form the content of their respective characters.

Rapoport's complex work is at its most convincing when her humanist concerns manifest in a deft combination of satire and pathos, couching poetic symbols in technological settings where they may surprise and delight us.

—BARBARA MORRIS

ANALYSIS OF AN ARTIST'S CHOICE

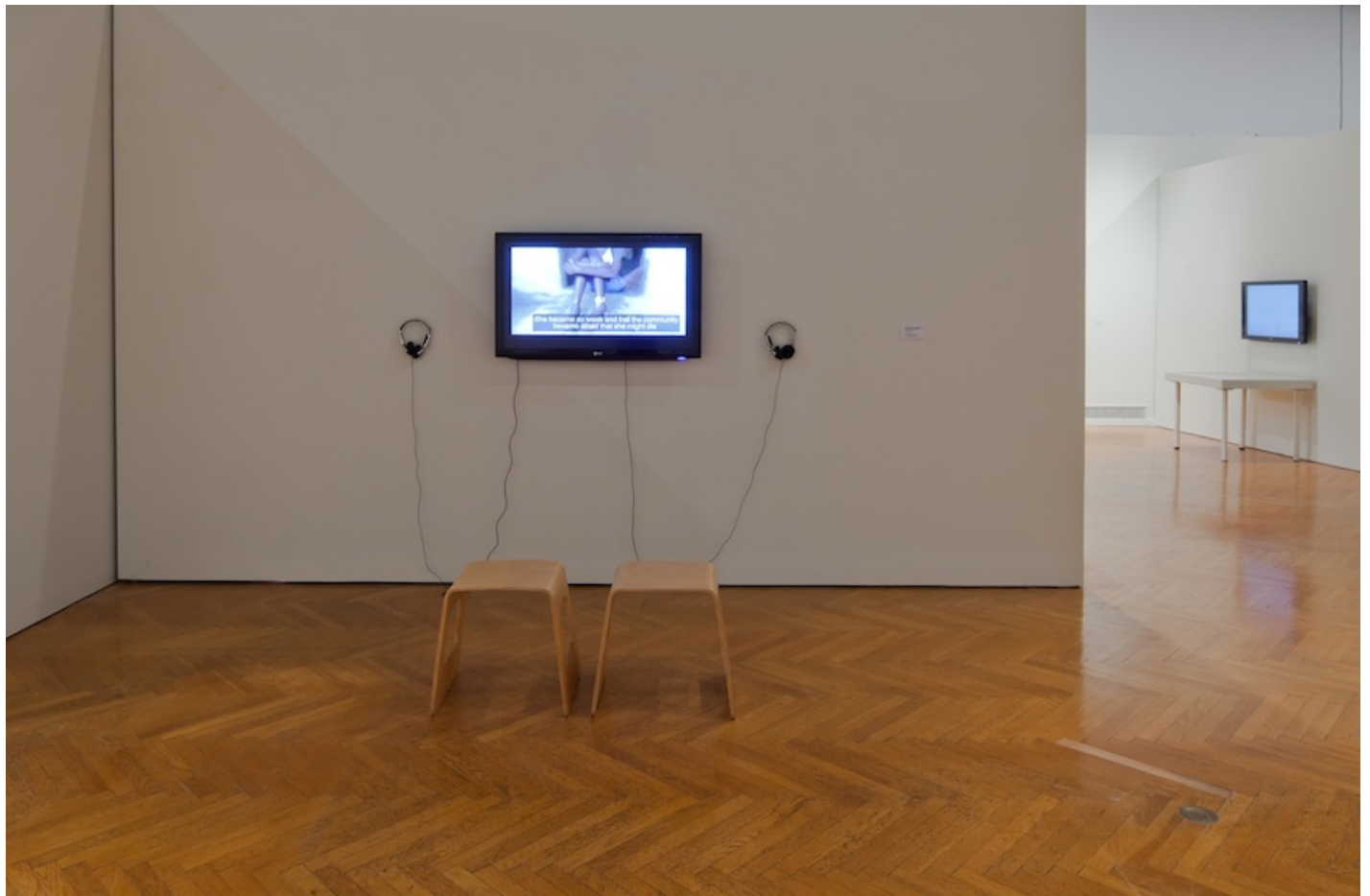


Objects on My Dresser: Tansu, 1979/1983
Photo: Phil Bond





Bonito Rapoport China, 1978
Photo: Phil Bond



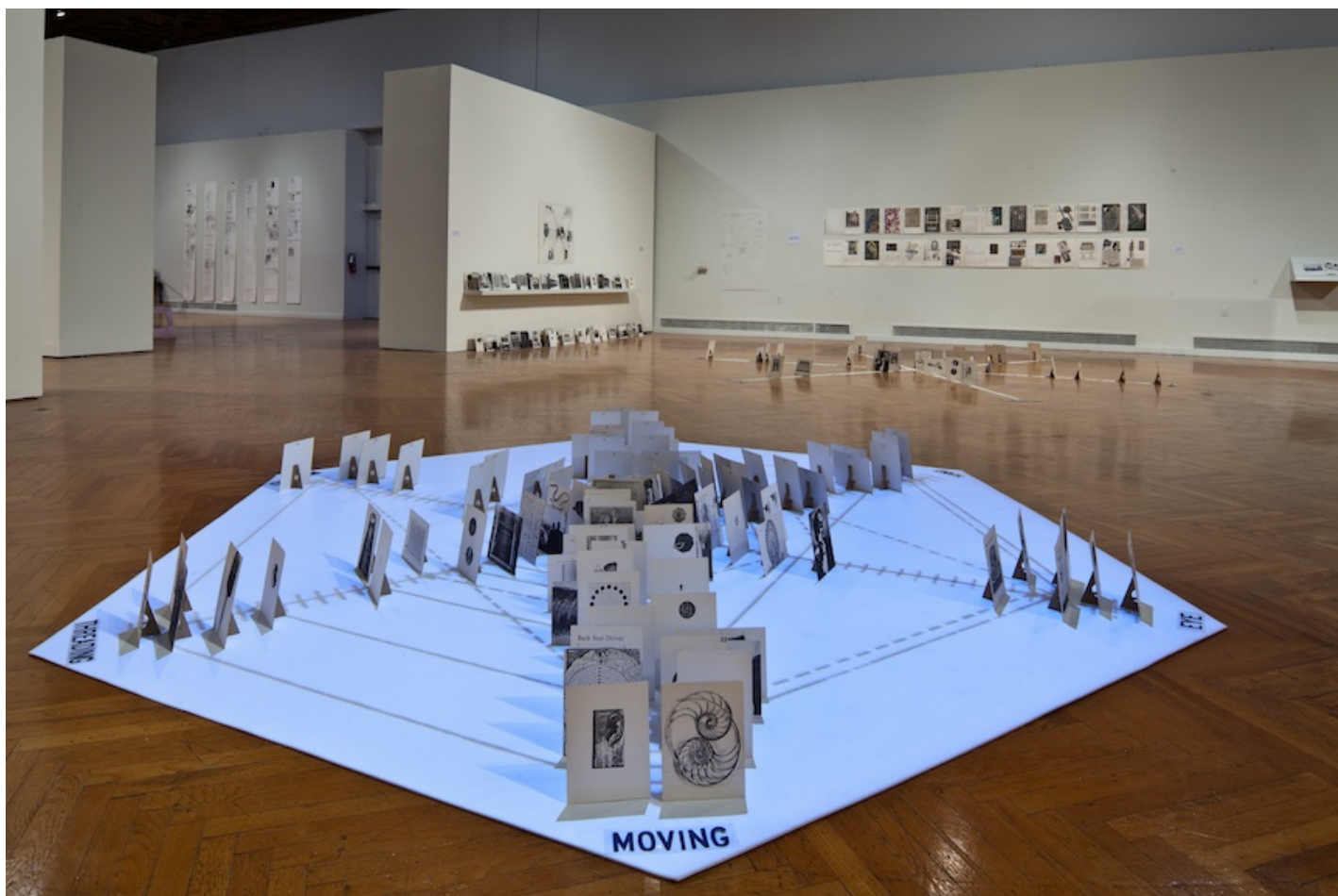
Make Me a Superman, 2008
Photo: Phil Bond



Nuclear Family, 2011
Photo: Phil Bond



Spaces of Life: The Art of Sonya Rapoport (installation view)
Photo: Phil Bond



Psycho-Aesthetic Dynamics, 1980
Photo: Phil Bond



Shared Dynamics, 1981/2012

Photo: Phil Bond



Make Me a Superman, 2008

Photo: Phil Bond