The first thing I did, after entering the gallery and introducing myself to the gallerist, was ask to use the bathroom. “I know this is usually forbidden,” I said apologetically, “but I have to go, and I don’t think I can sit and drink whiskey for an hour if I don’t.”

No problem, he replied, and suddenly there I was, peeing in a Chelsea art gallery rather than trekking long blocks in desperate search of a toilet. Sign #1 that this was not a normal visit.

The second sign was probably the whiskey, which, when I entered, could be seen in a glass bottle on a small wooden table in the center of the gallery; at it sat two people, their faces flushed and their tones hushed as they spoke. That will be me in an hour, I told myself, but for the “hushed” part, because I’m not exactly a quiet drunk.

In Instructions for Drinking with a Friend, part of her recent solo show at Cristin Tierney Gallery, MK Guth curates an experience for two friends (“someone that you have spent time with on more than two occasions,” as per the artist’s instructions) to sit and drink whiskey. It starts with physical objects: the small table, two accompanying stools, a custom napkin, a handmade book, a custom engraved glass bottle filled with whiskey,
and two hand-blown glasses (plus, mercifully, a carafe of water). It continues with instructions: put the napkin on the table, sit across from each other, choose a topic that’s not something you normally talk about, and, before you begin your conversation, read aloud Charles Baudelaire’s poem “Get Drunk,” whose opening lines proclaim:

One should always be drunk. That’s all that matters; that’s our one imperative need. So as not to feel Time’s horrible burden, one which breaks your shoulders and bows you down, you must get drunk without cease.

And so we did — we got drunk.

But first we sat down. My friend Julie and I, face to face at this table, me in my element, she decidedly not in hers. What exactly were we doing there? she had asked me when she arrived, and I had tried to explain it as best I could. Social practice, relational aesthetics … you know, art. But there was a moment of hesitation when we sat; it was palpable. What do we do now? How does our friendship work here?

And just as quickly as it appeared, it went. Because I’ve known Julie for 15 years; times at which we’ve gotten drunk are not in short supply. We’ve gotten drunk at a hostel in the Swiss Alps, by the side of a lake in Nicaragua, after trekking on a glacier in Iceland, on a golf course while underage in our hometown. And so, for us at least, getting drunk in an art gallery in New York was not the most unusual thing we could do.
Sure, we talked about politics, which we don’t normally. Yes, at times that meant we had to stop ourselves from veering into our perennial topic, our lives. But mostly we just talked like Julie and me, and I don’t honestly remember the details all that well, and I forgot to take an artful photo of our glasses filled with the deliciously smooth, amber-brown liquid, because we were too busy getting drunk.

When we were done, we walked out into the gleaming sunlight, my head buzzing with the beginnings of a headache. We wanted food, we agreed, and to keep drinking. We walked for a while, found a restaurant, sat down across from one another once more and continued to talk and drink. “I felt like art!” Julie confessed as we finished our dinners. “That one woman walked in, and I wanted to do my normal thing and make eye contact and smile, but I realized I didn’t have to, because I was art!”

I was happy to hear this, in part because I hadn’t felt it myself. I’d felt mostly like a drunk person in an art space, which is maybe a person I’ve been too many times before. Surely there’s a form to be made of getting drunk — a path one might follow, a way in which to become intoxicated and enlightened at the same time. I caught glimmers of it in the gallery, but in the end I just found myself partaking in an art that’s already been perfected: drinking with an old friend.
MK Guth, “Instructions for Drinking with a Friend” (2016), mixed media (2 hand-blown glasses, artist book, etched bottle of whiskey, embroidered bar cloth, and carrying case), 8 x 4 3/4 in (20.3 x 12.1 cm)