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Terry Berlier @ SJICA

Posted on 18 January 2014.



Core Sample Prints (This Land is Your Land), 2013, nine digital prints and This Not so Solid Earth (Pay Dirt), 2013, digital prints on paper, wood, bearings, hardware and rubber rope

Can things talk? Terry Berlier's exhibit, *Erased Loop Random Walk*, holds out the tantalizing possibility that they can. She crafts low-tech objects from refuse outfitted with electronic devices (sensors, synthesizers, computers, cameras, solar panels) that transform the visible into the audible, the abstract into the palpable, and the mundane into the absurd. Tree rings spun on "turntables" emit low rumbles. Scans of fake core samples, displayed in plexiglas tubes, yield intermittent squeaks and chirps. A solar-powered stringed instrument plucks out the melody of *Here Comes the Sun*, while a circular kiosk, made of salvaged piano parts, allows visitors to perform atonal duets on a retuned keyboard, echoing the experiments of Harry Partch.

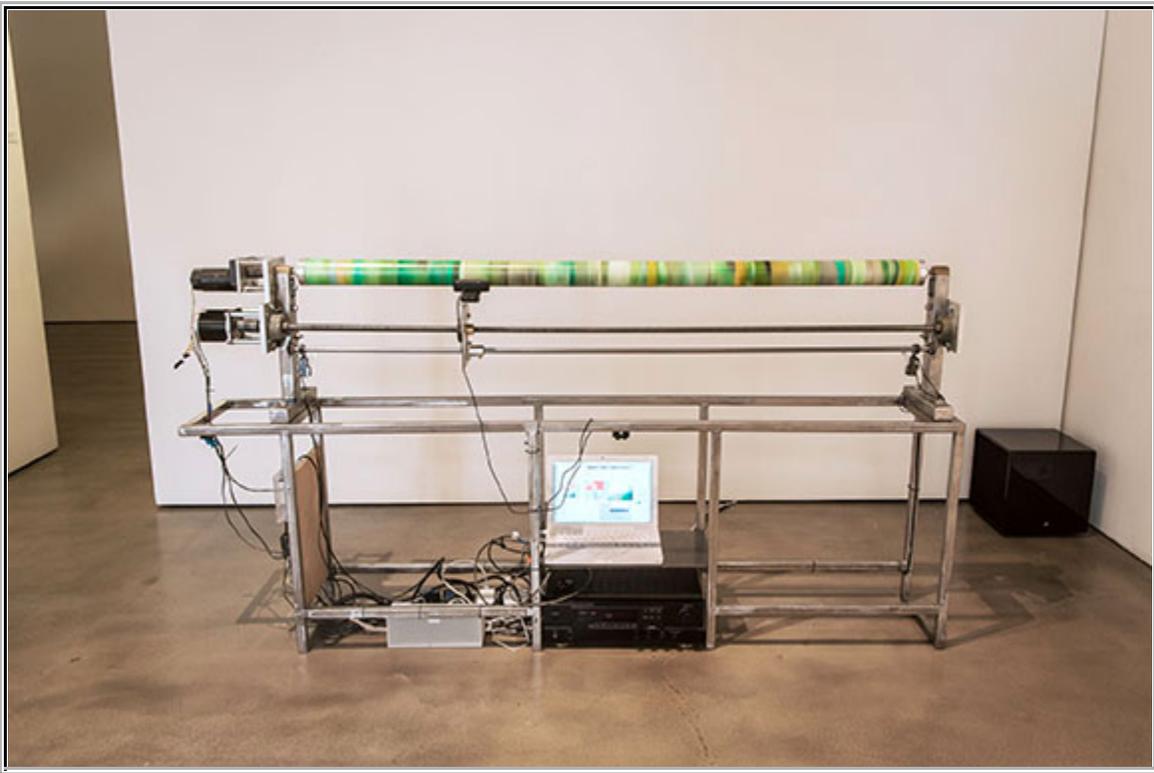
If all this sounds a bit science project-y, well, it is. Except for one thing: there's little actual science involved. It's art operating under the *guise* of science. Berlier, an assistant professor of art and art history at Stanford, engages with scientists, but she uses their research only as a jumping off point. She is, to some degree, a process artist. Her work is as much a product of serendipitous discovery as it is topical concerns, which, here, center mainly on the environment.

At the Laboratory for Tree-Ring Research in Arizona, for example, she learned that trees hold vast quantities of chemical, hydrological and geological data. So, too, do core samples of the Earth's crust. In her art, those facts remain largely in the background. The installation, *Log-rhythms*, in which tree rings spin like vinyl platters, comes off as a seriocomic exercise. The electronically generated noises hint at scientific inquiry, but the installation, which occupies the

gallery's back room, feels more like a poke at animism: the primitive belief that all things, living and inanimate, contain spirit. Her core samples offer a similar jest. She creates them by pouring plaster and dye into skinny cylinders which, when filled, resemble layers of ice cream permeated by different flavors of syrup. They hang like newspaper scrolls from wall hooks. When taken down and "played" like a pianola roll with a microscopic camera, two things happen. Sounds fill the room at irregular intervals and recorded data becomes source material for large prints. Nine vertical scrolls cover an entire wall; while two others, far larger, stretch across pulley-like contraptions that reach almost to the ceiling. Carrying the populist Woody Guthrie song-title slogan, *This Land is Your Land*, they look like tie-dyed fabric inscribed with moiré patterns. They're vivid but not easily apprehended. Like *Strontium*, Gerhard Richter's monumental photo installation at the de Young Museum, they are impossible to bring into focus, and as such, they exemplify the postmodern notion that facts are, at best, shifting approximations determined by



Log-Rhythms, 2013, metal, wood, motors, mac mini MAX, camera, Arduino. 3 total in installation, 20 x 16 x 14"

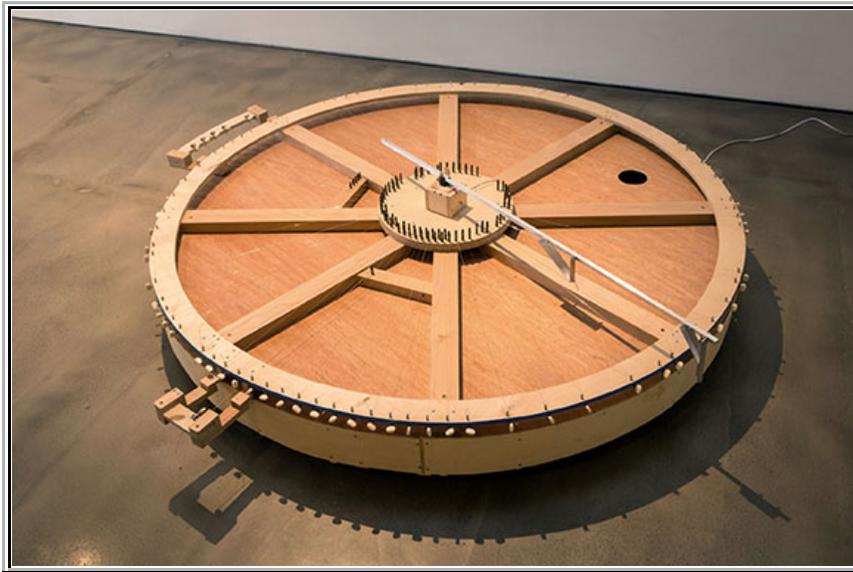


Core Sampling (Tick Tock), 2009, FGR-95, dyes, steel, motors, MAKE controller, , computer, sensor, microscope camera, PVC, aluminum, pocket watch and MAX. 9 cores 72 x 3 x 3 each; device 42 x 80 x 12"

perspective. They also, on account of their toxic colors, align Berlier with eco-oriented artist/scavengers like Hanna Kunysz who, last year, displayed columnar sculptures built of plastic trash that were seen as portents of environmental meltdown. Like many Bay Area artists, Berlier has spent significant time gathering material at San Francisco's recycling facility, Recology.

The fruits of those efforts appear most powerfully in *Ekman Transport (Plastic Ocean)*, a floor-mounted sculpture about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, the 6-million-square-mile gyre of plastic debris that floats in the North Pacific Ocean. Berlier depicts it as a wavy tilt-o-wheel, a grayish blue slurry of concrete and chalk whose suspended plastic contents look like what the sea might disgorge if it could vomit. Many artists have addressed this issue. Berlier's version bypasses any possibility of intellectualizing the problem. It cuts straight to revulsion, and rightly so, given what we know of plastic's impact on the food chain.

Another prominent theme in the show is time. *Standard Time*, a circle of 24 cyanotypes onto which a moving beam of light is projected onto images of rail tracks, deals with how, before railroads, every locale in America adhered to its own clock, a situation that demanded synchronization if schedules were to be operable. A less obvious, but equally intriguing aspect of this display is how trains changed the human *experience* of space and time. As Rebecca Solnit points out in her biography of Edward Muybridge, it wasn't the photographer's invention of the



When Comes the Sun, 2012, wood, motor, solar panel, aluminum, pain tuning pegs, guitar stunning pegs, guitar strings, pick, 12 x 74 x 74"

zoopraxiscope, a forerunner of motion pictures that introduced the concept; it was the train. It did so by moving people through the landscape, framing and reframing it for a filmic effect that presaged movies. Or so Solnit's argument goes. Its resonance here lies in the fact that the railroad magnate, Leland Stanford, whose university now employs Berlier, funded

Muybridge's research, which proved, among other things, that a running horse has all four hooves off the

ground, a fact then unknown. *Standard Time*, which runs as a loop, feels like a tribute to these long-ago events.

The exhibition concludes on a personal note, with an installation inspired by the artist's aunt who, at age 84, revealed in a letter that she was gay. To Berlier, who is openly gay, that information came as no surprise — her aunt lived most of her adult life with another woman. The surprise was how directly and articulately she described why she acted on her desires. It's a literary event that here takes on theatrical proportions thanks to Berlier's decision to hire an actress to read the text. The recording is accompanied the projection of a silhouette of a rocking chair moving back and forth. Both appear in a long narrow hallway pierced by a ray of light, a fitting backdrop for a story of self-liberation, recollected from an era when doing so held far greater risk than it does today. The title, *I Would Not Change It*, is the letter's last sentence. I'd apply it to the whole exhibition.



I Would Not Change it, 2013, Video + Sound

Beautifully installed, it places Berlier in the front rank of conceptual artists, by which I mean artists who not only have powerful ideas, but also have the ability to express them in ways that are materially rich and emotionally engaging.

—DAVID M. ROTH

Terry Berlier: "*Erased Loop Random Walk* @ [San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art](http://www.sjica.org) through February 14, 2014.

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This was one of my favorite exhibits in a long time. From concept to execution it was exceptional.

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