

Helen Mirra
in conversation
with Tina Fiske

Tina Fiske— Firstly, would you be able to tell us how *Standard Incomparable* as a project came about?

Helen Mirra— The idea came about while I was an artist in residence at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. On one level my being such was surprising, as I was aware of my lack of affinity with Gardner's project of privileged traveling and buying and keeping. I appreciated the curator Pieranna Cavalchini's idea of inviting someone who wasn't endeared to that approach. It was a strange enough context for me to be able to use the mirror to see an endeavor that was both a parallel and a reversal; for there to be international travel, but only for the objects, and to attend to objects that are explicitly not-declaring their uniqueness, nor relying on it for their worthiness.

In its scope (the common and the uncommon or incomparable) and scale (the world), *Standard Incomparable* reminds me of a 16mm film work of yours from 1999 – *Map of parallel 52° N at a scale of one foot to one degree longitude*. These are aspects that reach far back into your work?

It is touching to have you make the connection to the latitude line pieces. Yes. Something about the scale of the world being an emblem of breadth, and also it can seem quite snug, when represented at a map scale, or by examples. The latitude lines manifest after an inordinate amount of time with the Peters Atlas, which uses an equal-area projection – I can see the connection of *Standard Incomparable* to that as well, albeit more abstracted.

Can you talk about how you decided upon the particular set of ‘qualities’ for *Standard Incomparable* – the length of the arm, the width of the hand, seven stripes?

I’ve been keen on using one’s own body for measurement for a while, as a kind of intimacy and as reliable and less precise than a machine-made ruler. And while weaving, it seems one can’t help but be aware of one’s arms, one’s hands, their size — as one is really ‘with them’ when with a loom. And for me, the natural extension of the arm, inspired by drawing the shuttle through the warp, is a beautiful movement, and worth underlining. In realising the parameters, realised that the width of the hand, times seven, equalled the length of the arm. So more or less a square would be had.

They recall your floor sculptures *Sleepers* (1999), which you wove with un-dyed wool. One had seven stripes (four light, three dark), and the other had eight stripes (four light, four dark). You placed 2 x 10” planks of wood under the dark stripes matching the lift of railroad ties out of their gravel bed. How did you generate the number of stripes in those works?

Indeed they do recall! It was an unconscious coincidence. So predictable in retrospect. I think those numbers were the result of the logic that it was enough, but not too much. And probably also limited by how much yarn I could afford to purchase. Since then, seven became confirmed as a key number for me when I realised it was the right number of hourly indicators marking a daylong walk – that I didn’t want it to be eight, conforming to the eight hour work day, and I didn’t want it to be nine or more, because then it could be seen as boastful. So no matter how long a notated daylong walk was, I stopped ‘marking’ it after seven.

What the weavings have in common is equally as striking as their differences or variations. Did you have any expectations about that within the qualities that you set?

The weavings that were especially similar, made by people with geographical distance, were particularly poignant in relation to each other. As you can see there are some that are more outlying than others. And of course with any system, there are going to be elements

more at the center, and more at the edge, so to speak. Nonetheless I was surprised by those that were the most non-standard — which are those that do not use a plain weave — which I had assumed rather than stated. Once again learning the lesson to assume nothing.

Could you say something about the registers of time and place in the work? You recorded the birth date of each weaver — the resulting weavings would seem to index (at least partially) the body and place of their weaver at a particular moment in time.

Ah, I wonder how to say something about this — maybe it is just as you have noticed, somehow the spectrum of years, describing the participation from children to elders, is as much a part of the tenuous, shifting, yet, supporting structure of the project.

You asked the participating weavers to produce two weaves — one of which was circulated to another weaver — in this way you drew lines of exchange into the project — can you say a little about why you included this aspect?

I think it was a reaction to Gardner's private collecting. And to put me further into a service role — as I somehow wanted distance from a possible misunderstanding that this was 'my' project. And to add another intersecting aspect, along with calendar time and geographical space, and the physical bodies both of the weavers (shown in measurement) and of their familiar plants and animals (shown in material). And another doubling, like two feet, and an abstracted, wordless, physical, yet multi-placed conversation.

At what point did you begin to think of the exhibited group of weavings as a 'temporary' collection — further weavings were invited in Italy when *Standard Incomparable* was partially shown in Meran — but did you always intend that they would be dispersed?

Again, being literal, I'd say there is no such thing as a permanent collection. So that is being emphasised. And, one might see my lack of a plan for the project as irresponsible, as I didn't know what would happen to it after it was exhibited. At the beginning I only knew it would be shown in Pasadena, California. I just figured each

step begets the next, so, take one. I didn't see the dispersal until the invitation from Cample Line came, and then it seemed not only perfect, but obvious and inevitable.

Initially, when proposing *Acts*... you referred to a piece of 17th century English legislation *Act for burying in woollen* and its Scottish near equivalent *Act for burying in Scots Linnen*. Could you say how you came across it, and how it fed into your first ideas for how the weavings might be dispersed from Cample?

How did I find the English act? I do wonder. Luckily you, Tina, showed me the Scottish response. I wouldn't say it fed into my ideas, rather just that I read them as a prescription for the dispersal.

Then your thoughts began to form around your interest in bleach fields. Can you say something about how the connection emerged for you in relation to *Acts*...?

A few years ago I saw a small painting by Jacob Ruisdael, *View of the Plain of Haarlem with Bleaching Grounds*, and was mesmerised by the scene. A rough geometry of the linnen pieces laid out on the ground, flat and low, under a larger sky with big clouds. At a glance you could take it as a Quaker cemetery (another keystone site for me). Again, the connection didn't seem to emerge, it just presented itself. More like the different aspects were just waiting to be noticed in relation to each other.

***Acts*... will entail that the weavings are taken from the wall one-by-one and then walked on foot from Cample, in a direction and for a duration determined by the person walking. Were all the weavers happy for their weavings to be dispersed in this way?**

When I wrote to the weavers about this turn, asking them whether they were happy to allow it, or preferred to bow out, I received very thoughtful replies; in general they too seemed to find it just right. I think as the sense of the collection developed over the past few years, there was a growth in the sense of interbeing among the pieces and thereby their weavers, so there was already a letting-go underway. Let alone that they all had entrusted me to begin with. Six of the sixty-

seven participants asked to have their pieces returned. These folks also seemed to appreciate the dispersal action, but for various reasons didn't want to go this route. Two are in North America and I sent theirs to them a few months ago, and four are in Europe, and their pieces will travel back them after their time at CAMPLE LINE.

You have talked elsewhere about a residency that you undertook in 2008 in Basel, Switzerland, and how as a result of that residency your practice began to shift towards walking. Could you say what the act of walking means to you now and how direction or duration take shape in your own walks?

To go back a little further, to 1994 or so, when I found a phrase that has since stayed with me, in a 19th c. pocket-sized social services oriented book for sailors. Recognizing their particular hardships, they never knew whether it was 'the pull of the sea or push of the land' that led them to do what they do. And in a way, of course, what is the difference, other than perspective? One might internally feel one or the other, but since they turn with each other, it is almost arbitrary to claim one instead of the other. I guess to say, it is not as simple as whether it is a romantic lure or an avoidance or escape. This phrase enabled a lot for me – in relation to movement, geography, beauty, and ambiguity.

You have previously spoken about connections between walking and weaving – could you elaborate those here? I keep thinking of your group of works entitled *Waulked Triangles* and relatedly the practice of 'waulking' (not walking) the tweed.

Weaving and waulking, or weaving and walking, or waulking and walking. I'm obviously pretty simple-minded, and easily captivated by similitudes. Activities that are the same and different. Analogies.

***Acts...* will be undertaken by a range of different people as part of a collective undertaking. You are placing the process in our hands and by extension in the hands of those who will walk and place the weavings. Is there a set of qualities you would like us and those walking with the weavings to be guided by?**

My hope is that the walkings and their placings will have some rather ineffable qualities. Not-work. Not-entertainment. Not-formal. Not-lazy. Not-exhausting. Cultivating equanimity, the half-smile. Or to say: Just-walking. Just-placing. With pleasure. The walking is premised on the placing and the placing gives a context for the walking.

At the same time, it will comprise individual actions determined by and attuned to the walker (walking and placing). In those ways, it is a mirror to *Standard Incomparable* as well as a dispersal of it – and perhaps will be as emblematic of similarity and variation?

Yes – indeed it is this kind of mirror, while the refractions are what seem especially palpable.

You don't wish to have the individual processes of walking and placing documented photographically – in a way that would then seem to represent the work. It is important to you that *Standard Incomparable* as a collection is not replaced by another body of material?

Yes, exactly. The body of material appears to diminish. Though of course by placing the weavings on the land, it is really an incorporation which one could claim was a feeding or growing of sorts – rather than a reduction or disappearance.

However, one of the aspects of the project is that each walker will return to Cample and indicate the location where they placed their chosen weaving on a shared topographical map. A collection of places perhaps?

Well, putting a pin in a map, making a hole – it is arguably making a little space rather than making more material. And indicating the location on the map is notational of the scattered and unrecorded conversation happening in the landscape (if we consider the walking as an embodied speech-act). A collection of places represented by spaces.

You decided early on not to travel to Scotland for *Acts...*, and recently alongside a contribution you made to the *Shifting*

***Terrain* series for SFMoMA's Open Space, you said you had not renewed your expired passport. Are you now travelling less (less often, less far) by air or in general to make or to present your work?**

Yes.

Could you say something about the *MATTER MATTERS* exhibition rider that you have put together? You refer to it as a set of 'mores, not lesses'. How did your developing it come about?

Yes. I've been considering the freedoms granted by renunciation for a while, particularly in the context of Buddhist vows. The title of the manifesto-like document that the exhibition rider came from is CATHARTES 19 – a lift from the film manifesto *Dogma 95*. Here in northern California one often sees turkey vultures – and my fellow Ernst and I took to calling them by their beautiful Latin name, *cathartes aura*. This changed the way we saw them – as 'vulture' does not have such nice connotations, while the genus *Cathartes* points to their critical role in the ecosystem. So somehow appreciating these often-disparaged birds, combined with finding an increasingly close attention to ethics to be liberating, spurred writing and releasing the document, which was an expression of aspects of art-endeavoring I had been cogitating about for a long time – things that seemed so obvious to me, that I again and again learned were not so obvious to others, but that might be appreciated by some.

On your website under 2021, you list 'no exhibitions'. Do you intend to have a year with no exhibitions?

Yes.

And finally, is there a next project you are working on currently?

Yes, though I try not to take the view of there being a well-defined 'project' per se, and I'm not keen on the connotations of 'work'. Maybe outside of verbs and nouns both? Can I just say, 'I'm in.'? Or even better, just "In."? Any preposition will do.

Helen Mirra

b. 1970 Rochester, New York, lives in Northern California

Helen Mirra's approach is formally minimal with humble materials, such as used shipping pallets, raw linen, hand-dyed cotton banding. Since 2010, walking is an integral component to all her practice.

Mirra's work has been presented in solo exhibitions at the Renaissance Society, Chicago; Kunst-Werke, Berlin; Haus Konstruktiv, Zürich and the Berkeley Art Museum. She participated in the 50th Venice Biennial, the 20th Sao Paulo Art Biennial and the 12th Havana Biennial. A fifteen year survey (1996–2010) of her work was presented at Culturgest in Lisbon Portugal in 2014.



Jacob van Ruisdael
View of Haarlem with Bleaching Grounds
c.1670–1675, oil on canvas, 55.5 x 62 cm
Collection Mauritshuis, The Hague