

INTERVIEW: HELEN MIRRA

Rena Leinberger

The following took place on a cold February afternoon over spicy potato and chick pea soup at Rena's apartment. Afterward, Helen was knitting and Rena wore yellow slippers.

Rena Leinberger: I think I'm asking this from watching you knitting. I remember you asked me last summer, when we were working on *elm drop cover*,¹ if I thought of what we were doing in terms of women's activity, as that aspect was something that was sometimes questioned with your work. I'm assuming from what I know of you that you would say it isn't, but how do you see these activities?

Helen Mirra: When I was a teenager I stayed a few months in Sweden, and there the boys knit. I have a vivid memory of being in the train station and seeing young men knitting, and in my memory anyway they were knitting bright orange sweaters. But as far as what I was saying to you then, I think I was talking about what we were both doing?

RL: I think you were sewing and I was ironing.

HM: In 1999-2000 I made these floor sculptures which are weavings of railroad ties. As I was doing the project I was thinking specifically about the building of the railroad, and westward expansion and its relationship to violence and deforestation and so on and so forth. Also this microcosm of labor and that unique situation. I started making work about the railroad because I thought of it as an analog of the laboring through space on a boat, which had been an ongoing subject. The reason I wove those floor sculptures as railroad ties was because I was interested in that being (of course on a much smaller scale) a parallel of labor and this kind of material production as I wove in that same line. So I was thinking of that in terms of manual labor, which is in trades that are dominated by or exclusively male. I was considering weaving as far as working in a mill or a textile factory—though women and children were counted on for doing certain critical tasks because they have much smaller hands—it was men that were primarily doing the weaving work.

With *Sky-wreck*,² the cloth was woven for me at a cooperative. There were men and women working there, and men did the weaving itself. So . . . all that isn't to say that I want to distance myself from feminism, but I am not thinking about women's work or women's history of craft.

¹*elm dropcover* (2002), 12' x 15', part of *Declining Interval Lands* (2002).

²*Sky-wreck* (2001), handloomed indigo dyed cotton, 30' x 60'

In *Arrow*, there are flashes of image which are of this Babylonian tomboy, the "Mountain Girl," played by Constance Talmadge, taken from *Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith, 1913). The thing about *Intolerance* is that it shows Griffith's intolerance. He views women as simple and ugly, either really ugly or blindly romantic. But that is an aside. "The Mountain Girl" imagery follows a violent



Arrow (2002), video projection, sound, 28'

trajectory, at first kicking and hitting, and it escalates to her joining the army, taking up a bow and arrow and, with glee, participating in the war. I was thinking about violence and its aftereffects and that's why I was using a thunderstorm for the structuring piece. So the piece is 28 minutes long, and that's the average length of a thunderstorm. The flashes of the image are like irregular lengths of flashes of lightning and then the sound (which occurs mostly in the dark) is an analog to rain—my guitar, and thunder—bass guitar. So you sort of see a flash and hear a rumble, a kind of reverberation of the flash of violence, which you are hearing. I was drawn to the image of her because she was this fascinating and anomalous image in a film from a hundred years ago, she's further still back in Babylon, she's a tomboy, and it's really strange material. The material was the impetus for the work, but as I considered options for other imagery once I was working on it, I felt it was important it was a woman so that it wasn't specifically about male violence. I have this fear of my work being didactic; I probably overcompensate for this and it ends up being not clear at all.

RL: So with this thought of work not being didactic, I'm curious about your use of certain materials or imagery or sources and letting them stand in for something else. Maybe metaphor isn't the appropriate word or way to describe that, but I wonder how this process works for you. It seems that as you set these things

**THE IDEA OF "GROUNDING DOWN"
THAT HAPPENS IN THE QUAKER
MEETING: THAT'S A TERM I COULD
LIKE WITH MY WORK . . .**

out, you're requiring your viewer to accept these same conditions of the metaphor to follow that along. And so, while that may not be didactic it sets up a certain situation—Like with elm dropcover, army blankets stand in for militarism. This used for this specific reason, that used for that specific reason, etc. To read the work does the viewer have to come to the same set of assumptions as you? I guess I'm thinking of this along with your interest in Quakers and their avoidance of dogma. . . . when you choose specific materials or characters or historical sources as a way to connect to something contemporary, if metaphor can be thought of as some kind of equivalency, what this does for your role as artist.

HM: When I make the decision to use army blankets because I'm thinking about militarism, I have some faith that the connection is atypical or under enough that it isn't didactic. And then my hope is that since it materializes in a certain way then there's some way that it is absorbed. The way it's absorbed is not some clearly articulated thing about a specific position on the issues that I'm thinking about when I'm making the work. Somehow those ideas are brought up, but that's all I do. When I'm making work I'm thinking about a set of ideas and making decisions because of those ideas I'm thinking about, and so its interesting to me because of some mix of personal logic and intuition. There is some logic but it is idiosyncratic I guess. I have no particular motivation; I'm not trying to do anything in my work.

RL: Some of these ideas that you let surface in your work seem best, or rather most easily (if that were that possible), understood linguistically. So then while we are offered that through a translation into materials experienced perceptually/bodily, we are also given an accompanying text piece that finds its way from some other angle; as in the case of *Declining Interval Lands* and also the poem with *Sky-wreck* . . .

HM: With *Sky-wreck* there was a Paul Celan poem. I'm interested in things that are not clear to me but are somehow reverberant. I don't know how to say this clearly, but I'm not interested in understanding things. I feel like I've been incredibly affected by Celan's poetry, for example, and that has taken place despite a lack of deep research. For instance some Celan scholars write extensively about Jewish mysticism, and how that comes into the work; and what does

this phrase mean whether autobiographically or historically etcetera, and somehow that's not important to me. Probably there would be some response like "Well, you have to know these things to understand Celan's poetry" and I would say "Well, then I misunderstand, or don't understand, or whatever, but I am nonetheless engaged." So I guess that's also why the interest in the Quakers is there, and the avoidance of dogma. Rules don't make sense to me, and somehow this is related to being aware of how little we know. This is what is interesting to me about Quaker meetings, the lack of rules and the way it becomes how clear what is not necessary or possible to say.

RL: I'm interested in, as you say, rules that don't make sense . . . in the way things don't add up and where there are gaps between things. I'm wondering how you see a relationship between your text works and objects; if the text is a way of somehow illuminating or providing another way to access the fabric pieces, or another thing that sits alongside tugging at the edges attempting to pull itself in.

HM: The text piece in *Declining Interval Lands*, which was called *Elm/Elias*, was a kind of timeline of European immigration and westward expansion and deforestation and tree planting and moments of protest, dissent. I try to make the text works as easy to read as possible—they're usually not very long, you don't stand still—you're walking. They're still normally glanced over. Which is the nature of museum going or gallery going. It's not a complaint; it's just how people often look at work. Anyway. It's there because to me if you do spend time with that piece it does relate to the other works in the space and in a way it clarifies them. But more than it clarifies them; it just sort of frames them. It doesn't distill them. Hopefully doesn't spell anything out.

RL: More as a way of opening things out?

HM: Right. It's sort of a cliché of asking questions or things being brought up. The idea of "grounding down" that happens in the Quaker meeting: that's a term I could like with my work; that my work is sort of brought up and let to settle. Paul Celan said poems should be like handshakes.

[Long pause.]

RL: I like that . . . I do have a question about a few people that are cited as influences to you. Buckminster Fuller, Froebel's kindergarten—

HM: Buckminster Fuller is relevant, but *Sky-wreck* is only tangentially related to Fuller. It's not what the piece is about. The reason I was looking at Fuller was via Froebel's kindergarten system, which Fuller participated in and talked about. Fuller is a positive example of the Froebel education, which is the idea of learning through experimentation, trying things out for the sake of experimentation. The Montessori system comes out of Froebel's system. And with kindergarten, there is the garden—each child has his or her plot of land,

and what happened in the classroom was with these abstract materials. That was at a time when children played with really detailed models and people in little outfits. Speaking of gender, a girl doll who was wearing a dress, states that's what girls do, they wear dresses. But with a block, it can be a girl or a house or a loaf

of bread. It can be anything and it isn't determined. For children to be working with abstraction and for them to come to their own conclusions about the world instead of being told "These are the things of reality." But that sounds so obvious that it doesn't seem an interesting point to make. The other thing is that Froebel was a crystallographer. He developed his pedagogy through crystallography. Seeing this link between nature and geometry, the children had the garden along with abstraction.

RL: There's something so optimistic about these sources. How radical Froebel and the Quakers were; the utopia of Fuller (even though he was a tangent). I'm thinking about that optimism, unwavering, and ideas of utopia. And now, I don't know if that's some-

thing we trust anymore. I'm wondering how you see these historical sources related to contemporary thinking.

HM: My temperament isn't optimistic or energetic. But I'm interested in looking at positive models, which are both rare and vast.

RL: This question seems to change the subject a bit, except for the tangential link of history and sources. I'm really struck by the materials and processes you use, antiquated, often awkward but I mean that in a good way—Things like looms and typewriters and—should film be included on that list do you think?

HM: Yeah.

RL: I don't know if these have any nostalgic value for you, or if it's because they seem awkward, or something else entirely, but I'm interested in how or why you were attracted to these.

HM: I don't know if this connection will make any sense. But I'm particularly interested in walking as this kind of doing something, moving through



As a turkey. Council Rock Elementary School, Rochester NY

space, it can of course be very contemplative. You're physically engaged and walking could get put on that list in a way, with typewriters. I use a typewriter because I really like it physically. What I'm interested in, and what is maybe disappearing from the world, is materiality. So to me it doesn't feel like nostalgia. There's this new stapler I saw an ad for in the New York Times. It's not a stapler but somehow it punches a hole in your paper and makes a little U instead of a staple.

RL: Ooh nice.

HM: Super nice! There's sort of a beautiful connection it makes with paper.

It's a round plastic thing and I want one; I am waiting until they have green ones

back in stock. Maybe that's a stupid way to say I'm not nostalgic. Or when I was in Zurich I went to the Bodum store. I tend to like things where I can see what is happening. And also I have an aversion to electricity. Again not as nostalgia, but eco-

RULES DON'T MAKE SENSE TO ME, AND SOMEHOW THIS IS RELATED TO BEING AWARE OF HOW LITTLE WE KNOW.

logically. I can still use a manual typewriter. Yes the ink is petroleum-based etcetera, but there are degrees. The reason I brought up walking with you asking the antiquated question: I have been reading W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*; there is content I don't understand but I am moved by. The book is premised around a walk/ramble. There's a way you know the book was recently written, but there the feeling that it has simultaneity with, for instance, the writings of [Walter] Benjamin but there's a sharp edge that makes it clear it was written later. I hope the work I make does that in a way: that it's not a facsimile of a Shaker quilt or 70's minimalism or anything in between, but there's something about those things that are there in some way but are something else. And that it is not in a way that is totally clear, that I insert some modern element and that's what makes it clear that it's contemporary.

RL: What about your relationship to minimalism? It's something that is referenced often in writing about your work and I'm confused by it. I see obvious visual similarities but other than that it seems to come from such different places.

HM: Oh dear. I am so bad at talking about my work and I have already put my foot in my mouth enough. I make work that makes sense to me and this is how it looks. I am not comfortable with verbosity—is that a word?—I am comfortable with friendly brevity.

RL: You have mentioned your dad and his influence; was his influence mostly as you were growing up? Or does that continue in your adult life?

HM: We have been talking about how to collaborate on a project or projects. My childhood was incredible because of his generosity, with time and

patience and unbelievably brilliant stories and puppet shows. He is very slow and steady, and at the same time capable of this amazing perfect illogic. Crucially, he never told me what to do, and this was supportive, not disinterested. He wholly believed in self-motivated learning; he went to San Diego to do workshops with “humanist psychologist” Carl Rogers when I was a kid.

RL: In some of your earlier videos I saw recently at the Video Data Bank, childhood seems to be a theme. As in *I, Bear* and *Excerpts from Songs*. Is this still something that figures into your more recent work? There is perhaps a certain childlike wonder toward your subjects?

HM: I continue to think about knowledge acquisition. I like childhood because of the lack of a need to rationalize behavior.

RL: Your cartography as a way of representation seems as quirkily personal as it is faithful to its sources. Do you see this more as about what can be understood and measured, or what is lacking in the map? Or is it a question of both/and instead of either/or?

HM: I definitely like both/and better than either/or. Of course real maps are useful in a way mine aren't. I need some structure to make work within, and cartography is great because there is math, and it is potent.

RL: Can you talk a little about pieces and fragments? Whether they are lines of text or flashes of film, or a slice of the map from one line of latitude or even a segment of sky, you seem to tend toward very small parts of an unfathomable whole.

HM: I am distrustful of grand gestures, but I am also not attracted to “the personal.”

“I have nothing to say and I am saying it.”