



## Helen Mirra/MATRIX 209

### 65 instants

November 23, 2003 – January 24, 2004

University of California  
Berkeley Art Museum

MATRIX

Helen Mirra/MATRIX 209

The principles inherent in Helen Mirra's practice are antithetical to many commonly held notions regarding artistic expertise and, by extension, freedom. Mirra, who creates work in fabric, drawing, sound, film, photography, and text, consistently describes herself as a "careful amateur." This tendency to embrace newness, learning, and relearning mirrors the Buddhist notion of the beginner's mind. Beginner's mind is described by Soto Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi as being "just present to explore and observe and see a 'thing as-it-is.'"<sup>1</sup> As Herman Melville described his protagonist Billy Budd, "he could not read, but he could sing."<sup>2</sup> Mirra's work is distinctly minimal, but in her practice, the elimination of choices is engaged as a means of achieving greater freedom. Her works feature a consistent palette of green, blue, grey, and brown, and indeed all her clothing is within this range. Through limitation or reduction, subtle, minute, and sublime elements become more readily apparent.

Mirra draws on a broad array of scientific, historical, and aesthetic references which, as she says, are embedded in her decision-making and compressed into the things she makes. Pragmatism and Buddhism are dual influences in her MATRIX work for their concepts of cultivated consciousness. The title *65 instants* refers to the second-century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna's idea regarding the time between when initial perception occurs and intellect or judgment ensues. Sixty-five instants are said to occur within a moment, the length of time of a finger snap; these instants have been variously described as too short to comprehend and registerable if one is sufficiently attentive. Mirra's use of sixty-five instants in this work is "crucially, not mystical or scientific, but a means of thinking about time and space."<sup>3</sup> As Buddhist teacher Seung Sahn wrote in *The Compass of Zen*:

This world is impermanent. Everything is always changing, changing, moving, moving, moving, moving, nonstop. Even one second of our lives seems full of so

much movement and change in this world that we see. But your mind—right now—is like a lens whose shutter speed is one divided by infinite time. We call that moment-mind. If you attain that mind, then this whole world's movement stops. From moment to moment you can see this world completely stop.<sup>4</sup>

For the project, Mirra made sixty-five works in her studio, each over the course of a day. Each is constructed from a recycled shipping pallet plank, hand-sawed to match the length from the elbow to the fingertip of one of the artist's arms and the width of her other hand. The planks are then diligently hand-sanded and monochromatically painted, the holes and cracks filled with wood putty, and the work given protective coatings of tung oil. The shipping pallets Mirra used for *65 instants* come from the Richmond Pallet Company, which repairs and resells pallets. While businesses such as this can be found in every major city, in fact 80 percent of pallets are deposited into landfills after a single use. Mirra chooses to use the reclaimed, mostly oak pallets less to engage with the idea of the found object or the dialogue about high and low in art than out of efficiency and environmental sensitivity, which recalls the Zen Buddhist axiom to "leave no trace."

That the individual pallet pieces have a history is revealed by their markings, but it is impossible to determine where they have been and for what they were used. Painting the planks with milk paint, a matte furniture paint common in the nineteenth century—a time of massive deforestation as well as immigration—reflects Mirra's interest in such historical links as well as in how time is marked physically. Though each of the sixty-five instants is monochromatically painted, the colors vary from instant to instant, as Mirra mixed paint from dry pigment each day, one color for the plank and another for the putty. From pine needle green to bark grey, the painting process is one of reimbuing the planks with their original "tree-ness."<sup>5</sup> The experience of viewing them is not unlike staring at a hillside covered with the same type of tree and finding a multitude of different colors.

Cover: *Sixty-five instants* (detail), 2003; ink and milk paint on cotton; 16 mm x 130 in.; courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe, Germany. Photo: Ben Blackwell.



Mirra uses the same parameters for each work—her choices significantly reductivist—but, although ostensibly alike, the sixty-five instants are unique by default. Perhaps it is here that perfection is found in imperfection, a notion that calls to mind the Japanese Zen Buddhist *wabi* aesthetic. *Wabi* is, literally, "poverty." The *wabi* aesthetic locates profundity in the mundane and recognizes the beauty of rusticity; it is the beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete, modest and humble. Mirra's handmade objects, stripped bare and culled from workaday realities, craft a humble flatness and horizontality.<sup>6</sup> Her process involves precise, repetitive actions that mirror meditation and honor labor. The daily process for each work is a meditation comparable to *kinhin*, or walking meditation, directed toward making space and prolonging instants. The Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey argues that aesthetic experience is rooted in life's commonplace activities and experiences. Reflecting both Pragmatism and the Zen Buddhist teachings of D. T. Suzuki, artist and musician John Cage wrote in his 1961 book *Silence*, "We are involved in a life that passes understanding and our highest business is our daily life."<sup>7</sup>

Mirra also shares with Cage an interest in duration, the everyday, and chance operation. *Indeterminacy ... Ninety Stories by John Cage, with Music*, one of Cage's key works, is remarkably similar to Mirra's *65 instants* in terms of process. Cage explained:

I tell one story a minute, and, when it's a short one, I have to spread it out. Later on when I come to a long one, I have to speak as rapidly as I can.... The continuity of the ninety stories was not planned. I simply made a list of all the stories I could think of and checked them off as I wrote them.<sup>8</sup>

Language in Mirra's work is employed strategically and systematically to bring up ideas both visual and aural. Almost all of the titles of the sixty-five instants consist of two words, "third" being one of them. Some titles may reference the original use of a pallet: *Drifted third*, *Sinking third*, *Moving third*; some name specific people: [Ad] *Reinhardt third*, [Dainin] *Katagiri third*, *S.B.*

*Third furrow*, 2003; reclaimed pallet wood, milk paint; approximately 5 1/2 x 21 x 1/2 in.; courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe, Germany. Photo: Ben Blackwell.



[Samuel Beckett] *third*; still others reference Buddhist notions: *Empty third*, *Present third*, *Kinhin third*; and some simply name their material: *Third cedar*, *Third aspen*, *Third oak*. After deciding the title for each plank, Mirra types it onto a length of 16mm cotton banding twice: once to be applied to the back of the plank, and once to comprise what ultimately becomes a continuous poem. For this, the short lengths of fabric are sewn together to form a twelve-foot-long band of text, the order of which is the key to the placement of the planks. The process of typing each word on a manual typewriter allows each letter to have a sound and a motion, while assigning a title actualizes or completes each sculpture.

The ideologically reductivist notion of naming is found in the Diamond Sutra: "all these molecules are not really such; they are called 'molecules' ... a world is not really a world; it is called 'a world.'"<sup>9</sup> In other words, nothing is really anything; it is merely referred to as such. Mirra's sixty-five instants can be called paintings, sculptures, works, or planks. Their existence or importance as objects is derived from the process by which they were made and the intended prolongation of moments that they contain.

The poem resulting from the assembled titles can also be seen in the context of the writings of Jackson Mac Low, who, like Cage, studied with D. T. Suzuki, and who remains a committed Buddhist. The similarity is striking in *5th Light Poem and 2nd Piece for George Brecht to Perform Tho Others May Also Unless He Doesn't Want Them To—13 June 1962*:

Among the kinds of light that might be seen now  
might be  
arc-light  
watch-light light  
.....  
Jack-O'-lantern light  
water lights  
jack-light light

*Some third*, 2003; reclaimed pallet wood, milk paint; approximately 5 1/2 x 21 x 1/2 in.; courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe, Germany. Photo: Ben Blackwell.



refracted light  
 altar light  
 Corona-cluster light  
 magic lantern light  
 ice-sky light  
 clear grey light  
 iridescence  
 natural light  
 infra-red light<sup>10</sup>

The repetition of the word “light” here emphasizes difference, the varieties of possibilities regarding the projection of light. In Mirra’s work, the use of “third” seems to speak at once to similarity and comparability or relativity.

One of the primary references for the use of the word “third” throughout *65 instants* is Pragmatist philosopher C. S. Peirce’s concept of “thirdness,” here considered in relation to the Buddhist notion of the middle way. The middle way is the principle that infuses the entire corpus of moral teachings in Buddhism. Thirdness perhaps can be considered as similar to the concept of beginner’s mind; it is described by Peirce as “the mode of being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third in relation to each other. Thirdness is the basic mode of all being; secondness and firstness are derivatives.”<sup>11</sup> Peirce wrote:

By the third, I mean the medium or connecting bond between the absolute first and last. The beginning is the first, the end second, the middle third ... Continuity represents Thirdness almost to perfection ... Moderation is a kind of Thirdness; the positive degree of an adjective is first, the superlative second, the comparative third ... Sympathy, flesh and blood, that by which I feel my neighbor’s feelings, is third.<sup>12</sup>

The third, then, as described by Peirce, is related to compassion and consideration, as is the beginner’s mind.

In addition to the variety of philosophical and literary practices that influence her work, Mirra also draws on art historical vocabularies of Minimalism and Conceptualism. Visually, her surfaces have an affinity with the encaustic

*Third means*, 2003; reclaimed pallet wood, milk paint; approximately 5 1/2 x 21 x 1/2 in.; courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe, Germany. Photo: Ben Blackwell.



surfaces of Brice Marden’s split canvases. The formal strategies that characterize Marden’s paintings—a preoccupation with rectangular formats and the repeated use of a muted, extremely individualized palette—also apply to Mirra’s approach. Importantly, Marden has described these early works as highly emotional and subjective, despite their apparent lack of referentiality.<sup>13</sup> Another intentional intellectual and aesthetic influence is Ad Reinhardt, whose black paintings contain both emptiness and everything.

The viewer of Mirra’s work can reference a diverse network of ideas or come to it with a fresh, uncultivated perspective. Expertise is unnecessary. Mirra’s approach, uncommon in contemporary life and art practice, is itself motivated by compassion and consideration for humanity and the world at large. The process of creating *65 instants* is an attempt by the artist to expand an instant and subsequently compress that instant into an object. It reverberates within this place of momentness. As opposed to being a starting or ending place, it is of the middle way, it is a third.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson  
 Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

<sup>1</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* (San Francisco: Weatherhill, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Helen Mirra, “Recent Film and Video,” public lecture, UC Berkeley, October 16, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> The artist in conversation with the author in her Richmond, California studio, September 25, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Seung Sahn, *The Compass of Zen* (Shambhala Dragon Editions, 1997), 143.

<sup>5</sup> Mirra, in conversation with the author.

<sup>6</sup> Frances Richard, *Helen Mirra: Declining Interval Lands* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2002), 2.

<sup>7</sup> John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, 1961).

<sup>8</sup> Liner notes from John Cage and David Tudor, *Indeterminacy: New Aspect of Form in Instrumental and Electronic Music. Ninety Stories by John Cage, with Music* (Smithsonian Folkways 40804, 1959), quoted

at <http://www.lcdf.org/indeterminacy/about.html>

<sup>9</sup> A.F. Price and Wong Mou-Lam, trans., *The Diamond Sutra and the Sutra of Hui-Neng* (Shambhala Dragon Editions, 1990), Section XIII.

<sup>10</sup> Jackson Mac Low, *22 Light Poems* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1968).

<sup>11</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, “The Categories and the Study of Signs,” in *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy*, 2nd ed., edited by John Stuur [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 98–100.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Burkes, Charles Hartshorne, and Paul Weiss, eds., *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 1:337.

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist/bio\\_101.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist/bio_101.html)

*Reinhardt third*, 2003; reclaimed pallet wood, milk paint; approximately 5 1/2 x 21 x 1/2 in.; courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe, Germany. Photo: Ben Blackwell.



Helen Mirra was born in Rochester, New York, in 1970. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Bennington College in 1991 and a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1996.

#### Selected Solo Exhibitions

2003  
 Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, U.K.  
 2002  
 “Arrow,” DYG Projects, Donald Young Gallery, Chicago, IL  
 “Declining Interval Lands,” Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY  
 2001  
 “Miller’s Views,” Art Statements, Art 32 Basel, Basel, Switzerland  
 “Sky-wreck,” The Renaissance Society, Chicago, IL

2000  
 “beforsten,” Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe, Germany  
 “Latitude Lines and Railroad Ties,” Gasser & Grunert, New York, NY  
 1999  
 Chicago Project Room, Chicago, IL

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

2003  
 “Ritardi e Rivoluzioni: 50th Venice Biennale,” Venice, Italy  
 “Paper Sculpture,” Sculpture Center, Long Island City, NY  
 “Land, Land,” Kunsthalle Basel, Basel, Switzerland  
 “There’s no land but the land,” Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe, Germany  
 2002  
 “Here and Now,” Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL  
 “Zusammenhänge herstellen,” Kunstverein Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany  
 “Sudden Glory,” California College of Arts and Crafts, San Francisco, CA

2001  
 “Tirana Biennial,” Tirana, Albania  
 “Contextual,” Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL  
 “Making the Making,” Apex Art, New York, NY  
 “Seems,” Block Museum, Chicago, IL

2000

*Disappear third*, 2003; reclaimed pallet wood, milk paint; approximately 5 1/2 x 21 x 1/2 in.; courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe, Germany. Photo: Ben Blackwell.



“Age of Influence,” Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL  
 “Sound, Video, Film,” Donald Young Gallery, Chicago, IL  
 1999  
 “You Smile and I Am Rubbing My Eyes,” Jacob Fabricius, Copenhagen, Denmark  
 “The Stroke,” Exit Art, New York, NY  
 “Faucet,” Exit Art, New York, NY

1998  
 “Trance,” Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA  
 “Pandemonium,” London Electronic Arts, London, U.K.  
 “Video & Film,” Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL  
 1997  
 “Some Kind of Heaven,” Kunsthalle Nürnberg, Nürnberg, Germany;  
 South London Gallery, London, U.K.  
 “Up Close,” Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA

#### Selected Catalogs

*Land, Land*, Kunsthalle Basel, Basel, Switzerland, 2003.  
*Zusammenhänge herstellen*, Kunstverein Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany, 2003.  
*Declining Interval Lands*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 2002.  
*Here and Now*, Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL, 2002.  
*Sky-wreck*, The Renaissance Society, Chicago, IL, 2002.  
*Sudden Glory*, California College of Art, San Francisco, CA, 2002.

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*Third consequence*, 2003; reclaimed pallet wood, milk paint; approximately 5 1/2 x 21 x 1/2 in.; courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe, Germany. Photo: Ben Blackwell.

#### Work in MATRIX

*Sixty-five instants*  
 2003  
 Ink and milk paint on cotton  
 16 mm x 130 in.  
 Courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe, Germany

2003	South wall: <i>Moving third</i> <i>Third furrow</i> <i>Third roof</i> <i>Third interval</i> <i>Third pine</i> <i>Third percept</i> <i>Third action</i> <i>Third harbor</i> <i>Third heap</i>	West wall: <i>Third means</i> <i>Katagiri third</i> <i>Reinhardt third</i> <i>Sinking third</i> <i>Recognized third</i> <i>Disappear third</i> <i>Zeno third</i> <i>Buried third</i> <i>Urn</i>	<i>Third edge</i> <i>Timber</i> <i>Thought third</i> <i>Sympathetic third</i> <i>Present third</i> <i>Repeating third</i> <i>Third clover</i> <i>Third acorn</i> <i>Third oak</i> <i>Third smoldering</i> <i>Seen third</i> <i>Empty third</i> <i>Kinhin third</i> <i>Kindled third</i> <i>Singsapa third</i> <i>No-sound third</i> <i>Drifted third</i> <i>Third paragraph</i> <i>Useless third</i> <i>Winter third</i>	<i>Dead third</i> <i>Grounded third</i> <i>Marsh</i> <i>Sentient third</i> <i>Beneficial third</i>	East wall: <i>Relational third</i> <i>Not-moving third</i> <i>Non-thought third</i>
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Reclaimed pallet wood, milk paint, tung oil  
 Each approximately 5 1/2 x 21 x 1/2 in.  
 Courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe, Germany

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