

Making it Real

Terry Berlier describes herself as “an interdisciplinary artist who works with sculpture, installation, sound, video, and drawing.” She likens her practice to that of a “general practitioner.” At bottom, however, the persona that shines through (even in her well-appointed Stanford University studio) is that of an old-fashioned, garage-workbench inventor. She is also a canny scavenger. Found materials (automobile horns, bicycle parts, telephone speakers, musical instruments, pieces of cast off cookware or household furnishings, architectural salvage) have formed the matrix of works often animated by repurposed technologies. Contraptions such as *Human Tuning Fork # 8* (a bicycle driven music box), *Queertime* (a grandfather clock spliced together with a chair, a TV, music box innards, and an accousticed electric guitar), and *Fellini Bike* (modified bike frames cobbled together with two chairs to create a tandem vehicle that requires one person to stop pedaling for the other to move forward) bring to mind the impractical machines imagined by Rube Goldberg more than the prescient innovations proposed by Leonardo da Vinci [Figs. 1-3]. Like Berlier, Goldberg took humor seriously. And, like Berlier, he had strong moral and ethical commitments (he received a Pulitzer Prize in 1948 for his political satire). The apparatuses Goldberg conjured up, such as a “self-operating napkin,” lampooned the efficient, assembly-line logic of consumer-driven society. Neo-Dadaist Jean Tinguely, whose “metamechanical” sculpture *Homage to New York* partially self-destructed in the courtyard of the Museum of Modern Art in 1960, deployed similarly anti-heroic, anti-capitalist strategies, as have others since.

Whatever artistic lineage one might posit, Berlier herself cites family relations as particularly significant in the evolution of her creative sensibility and her skills. The example of her great aunt Ceil was empowering, opening Berlier’s eyes to new horizons. “She was fiercely independent and liberal and left, outspoken and happy to engage in debates and discussions revolving around politics, art, and culture.” The planting days she organized with family and friends left a lasting impression on Berlier, who estimates that her great aunt planted some 3,500 trees over her lifetime. She also milled walnut trees from her own farm and taught herself woodworking. Berlier inherited some of her great aunt’s tools, as well as a strong commitment to the environment. She also picked up a thing or two from her father, whom she describes as “an inveterate tinkerer.” He made tools by recycling household appliances, using a washing machine motor to power a belt sander. “The door between the shop and the playroom was always open,” Berlier recalls, “and I did not distinguish any boundaries between the two—toys and tools, girls and boys, playing and making.” Her brothers, who took shop classes in school, taught her how to use the bandsaw, among other woodworking tools not usually available to girls.

At the age of 23, wanting to “do something real” and to “get the heck out of the Ohio suburbs,” Berlier joined the Peace Corps. She worked to improve the infrastructure of a Jamaican village where industrial contamination had devastated the local economy. While she was there, she gravitated toward the makers of things, the tinkers, the artists. “Seeing people make something out of nothing was the most inspiring—from the juice-box wallets and trucks made by children to the dugout canoes crafted by the fishermen.”

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She learned from this experience that her best shot at having real social impact was to exercise her creative agency. She came out as an artist.

Since that time, making something out of what other's might consider "nothing" has become somewhat of a specialty. As an artist, she has acquired skills that transform not only materials but also human consciousness. In addition to recycling found materials in her work--and just as importantly--Berlier reexamines received ideas. These ideas often take the form of a visual or verbal cliché that sticks in her mind. The Jamaican saying "two pan tops can't meet," for instance, prompted her to refute the homophobic logic of this truism with a sound sculpture titled *Two Pan Tops Can Meet* (2003) [Fig.4]. She fused thrift store pan lids together to form colorful casings for speakers that articulate her retort ("two pan tops can meet") against an ecstatically raucous sound track of clanging pans. The coupled pan tops hang from the ceiling to form a festive environment that evokes, both audibly and visibly, homosociality.

The Love that Won't Shut Up (2004) [Fig.5], stages a more ironic defense of same-sex love by updating Oscar Wilde's 1895 courtroom articulation of "the love that dare not speak its name" while recycling the title of a song performed by the radical drag queen Benjamin Smoke and the Opal Foxx Quartet. Berlier's homage to this queer historical trajectory features an antique automobile horn hermetically sealed off (along with a meter that measures decibels) within a series of nesting plexiglass cubes. A button mounted on the surface activates the horn. The blast, although muffled by pillows and baffled by airtight boxes, remains remotely audible, while a jump of the meter's needle visibly registers the sequestered horn's earsplitting potential.

Another quote from an iconic queer, an excerpt from Gertrude Stein's novella *Many Many Women*, serves as the starting point for Berlier's 2003 piece *Human Tuning Fork #4 (or World Tuning)* [Fig.6]. This sound sculpture consists of 242 speakers, one for every country in the world (191 nations and 51 territories, at the time of production), configured as intersecting circles. The miniature speakers, wired together to form a chain of transmission, broadcast Stein's mantra-like text ("anyone having been that one is the one that one is...") in seven languages. The loop schematizes local differences articulated with a global communications network while playing on the way that Stein's repetitious use of the signifier "one" both individuates and universalizes the subject. Citations from the same text provide the libretto for Berlier's roughly contemporaneous video piece, *Anyone* (2002). Here, the artist engages with the personal resonances of Stein's favored indefinite pronoun "one," exploring subjectivity within a semantic space of gender indeterminacy.

Berlier shares with Stein a facility for word play that activates her work and invites participation. This play takes a characteristically material turn in Berlier's 2005 installation *Rent Control* [Fig.7], which hinges on a visual pun. The installation materializes the rhetorical figure of the revolving door, a familiar trope in debates about the justice system as well as in studies on cycles of poverty. In Berlier's piece, an actual revolving door functions as a switch that causes a map of California's central valley to vibrate. The vibration, in turn, unsettles housing stock borrowed from the board game

Monopoly. The tiny red and green plastic row houses roam the valley floor anxiously or cluster in unstable colonies. As developments encroach further and further on farmland that once fed one quarter of the world's population, Berlier's piece playfully raises questions about who profits.

The same kind of semiotic alchemy transforms the expression "tipping point" into an invention called *Self-Leveler (aka: Tipping Point)* (2009) [Fig.8]. According to Malcolm Gladwell, who popularized the expression in his bestseller *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, tipping points, are "the levels at which the momentum for change becomes unstoppable." The term has since achieved currency within environmentalist circles, where it acquires a more ominous valence. "Environmentalists talk about the tipping point where Arctic icebergs and glaciers melt, raising the sea level, which started me thinking about this kinetic sculpture," Berlier explains, pointing to *Self-Leveler*. The human scale construct--set in motion by the rotation of a motor powered axe--sways to the brink of instability. (In fact, the piece has toppled more than once). A video monitor mounted at the armature's apex displays a loop of tidal footage. As Berlier's piece rocks back and forth the digital waterline remains miraculously level--thanks to a Wii remote and MAX software.

The collaboration of sculptor and video artist Ricardo Rivera has been crucial to the realization of this and several other interactive projects. For instance, Rivera helped Berlier to actuate the 2009 installation *Timeframe (61 Trees per Person)* [Figs.9 and 10]. The enabling gizmos (a computer, two MAKE controllers, a digital camera, wiring) are visible components of this installation, which features sixty-one digitally scanned "tree cookies" (thin cross sections of tree trunks) framed and mounted perpendicular to the gallery walls at even increments. The exhibit, with its precise rows of samples displayed in box-like frames, achieves the no-nonsense authority of a scientific display. However, the comings and goings of visitors (detected by a motion sensor) set the frames in rotation, introducing a haphazardly subjective element into the equation. The interactive aspect of this installation dramatizes the impact of humans on both natural and scientific environments, or shows, in Berlier's words, "how humans speed up the life cycle of trees." The artist conducted primary research for the piece at the Laboratory for Tree Ring Research in Tucson, Arizona. After talking to the dendrochronologists there, she came away with a better understanding of how trees map time and record environmental events such as climate cycles, how they register trauma, and how this natural memory can be retrieved and read. (Berlier also came away with an extensive digital archive of cross sections. She imagines what it would be like to play these like vinyl LPs. "Just think, a singing forest, a symphony of trees.")

The concept for the installation *Timeframe* came to Berlier while she was listening to a National Public Radio broadcast. "I learned about research conducted by Professor Nalini Nadkarni [of Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington], who used NASA photographs of the earth to count the number of trees on the planet." Based on this data, the scientist estimated that the ratio of trees to people is sixty-one to one. Berlier used a burning tool to inscribe her tree cookies with patterns replicating the silhouettes of

industrial deforestation (also recorded in NASA photographs). “I hope the piece will encourage people to think about how they use their sixty-one trees.”

A permutation of this project, *Plywood Posing as a Four-Foot Douglas Fir* [Fig.11], mimics the cross section of a tree expanded, telescope-wise, to visualize the passage and lived experience of time. The piece encourages viewers to take the long view and engage in long-term thinking about the planet’s ecosystems, its environmental history, and its future.

Berlier created a colossal version of this piece, *Longtime* (composed of sixty-one rings, strung together by aircraft cable, and expanded to a length of thirty feet) [Fig.12], for the Natural Balance exhibition in Girona, Spain. The exhibition ran parallel to the annual Temps de Flors flower festival there in 2009. Participating artists created temporary, site-specific installations within the Gothic architecture of Girona, taking advantage of the popular tourist event to raise consciousness about issues of sustainability. The artists conceived of their pieces with ecological concerns at the forefront of their minds, envisioning the reuse or recycling of their materials as an outcome. They came to Girona from all over Europe and the U.S., joining local volunteers who helped facilitate the interventions. In this way, Natural Balance organizers strove to “highlight the importance of international interdependence and collaboration around environmental issues.” Suspended from a medieval façade, Berlier’s *Longtime* (like the earth’s imperiled old growth trees) embodied contradictory qualities of monumentality and ephemerality, its enormous tree rings diminishing to a vanishing point.

Berlier’s preoccupation with the marks of time and its cycles led to the creation of a related project, *Core Sampling* [Fig.13]. If you know how to read core samples drilled from the earth’s fossil-bearing rock, Tim Flannery suggests in his book *The Weather Makers* (2005), “you can play the climatic history of our planet that they encode much like a pianola roll. And, like a pianola, the most captivating rhythms and melodies emerge when information from the cores is fed into the right machines.” Inspired by Flannery’s notion of a core-sample player piano, Berlier cast her own “pseudo core samples” out of layers gypsum cement colored with various pigments. Then, during a residency at San Francisco’s Exploratorium: Museum of Science, Art, and Human Perception, she built her pianola. A tiny camera scans the revolving core sample. Responding to this digital information, MAX distorts the tick-tock of an antique pocket watch in ways that correlate to changes in the core’s texture, density, striation, and coloration. This spuriously scientific apparatus registers formal variations that, in turn, evoke very real changes in the planet’s conditions of possibility. Berlier’s adaptation of sophisticated digital devices and edgy software to reinterpret old-fashioned technologies (here, a pianola and a mechanical clock) amplifies the organizing metaphors of temporality and history running through Berlier’s oeuvre.

By privileging anachronism and asynchrony in her practice, Berlier brings the past into contact with the present in ways that transform the very processes of historical narration. This skill recently earned her an invitation to participate in EG Crichton’s collaborative venture *Lineage: Matchmaking in the Archive* (2009-present). Crichton, artist-in-

residence at the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transsexual Historical Society of San Francisco, matches artists with archives in the institution's holdings to stage fertile encounters between living members of the queer diaspora and their predecessors. She matched Berlier with H. Drew Crosby, the proprietor of a used bookstore on Polk Street. Berlier studied the slim archive entrusted to her and learned that her "match" had worked as a nurse in the middle west before migrating to San Francisco in the late 1930s with her partner Marion Pietsch. Berlier describes the couple as "lesbians of the old order, that is, with lots of good reason, they were...stubbornly ambiguous about labeling themselves gay or lesbian." Although, according to Berlier, the two women lived and worked together for fifty years, amassing "a huge collection of queer books and ephemera, including an amazing...lesbian pulps collection," they never came out as lesbians. They installed wooden blinds on every window of the bookstore and would close the shutters after work saying, "Let's shut the world out."

Many of the books on display in the shop bore price stickers marked "NFS" (not for sale). And NFS is the title of the piece Berlier created [Fig. 14]. Berlier's sculpture consists of a shuttered window framed with San Francisco Victorian trimmings. Behind the slats of the shutters, clips from vintage lesbian porn appear on a monitor. When the viewer moves in to take a closer look, a sensor activates an alternate track (thanks, again, to MAX programming by Ricardo Rivera). A montage created out of excerpts from *Broken Appointment*, a 1955 B-movie about a nurse who makes house calls on female patients, appears instead. Berlier's hilarious edits bring the film's latent homoerotic content to the surface. The view through this window and into these lives, if partially obscured and entirely mediated, is always more or less homoerotic.

Retreating to a respectable distance, or lowering the slats of the window shutters to reduce visibility, will trigger a return to the more explicitly pornographic default footage. Using both the mechanics and the poetics of shutters, Berlier recreates an erotic economy that interrupts its own gestures toward "the outside" to heighten private pleasures. The piece playfully resists both the satisfactions of voyeurism and visibility's tradeoffs without inducing nostalgia for the closet.

Whether mapping interruptions to the cyclical patterns of the natural universe, introducing obsolete objects into new interpretive environments, using semiotic play to turn common sense inside out or to pervert sacred narratives (including those of gay liberation), Berlier's projects provoke thought without resorting to didacticism. Her inventions amuse, astonish, and sometimes frustrate, prompting us to reflect more consequentially on the poignant fragility our planet, our social bonds, and our psyches.