



Terry Berlier

New Works

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The John and June Allcott Gallery
THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

NEW WORKS

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), Kim Novak stands before an exposed tree's center, transfixed. As if hypnotized, she intones, "Here I was born. And there I died. It was only a moment for you. You took no notice." As if on cue (albeit decades after Novak uttered those lines), Terry Berlier takes notice and takes up the tree's cross section as a central point of reference for her art, creating work that reverberates with the idea of deep time, geologic time or, perhaps more pointedly, arboreal time: Redwoods, such as the ones among which Jimmy Stewart and Novak circulate in *Vertigo*, can live up to two thousand years, so from the viewpoint of tree time, the span of time between *Vertigo*'s 1958 and 2012, the year in which Berlier presented new work at the John and June Allcott Gallery at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is really no more than the blink of an eye.

Berlier's trees are indicated rather than wholly present, represented by latent, potent fractions that resound with the idea of a whole. Berlier's trees have more to do with Joseph Beuys's live oaks than with Roxie Paine's metallic effigies or Jennifer Steinkamp's digital presences. They are traceable as time-keepers, correlated with temporal existence; they are temporal *be*-ings. More specifically, and inescapably much like ourselves, they are individual beings, marked by lifespans that vastly exceed our relatively fleeting frames of tenure on this fragile planet. For *Timeframe (61 Trees Per Person)* (2009), in which digital prints of tree fragments float suspended in the gallery space in frames rigged with motion detectors, Berlier cited the findings of Professor Nalini Nadkarni, who compares trees to people to demonstrate the magnitude of the world's "tree population." The very notion of trees that (or *who*) populate pushes the semantic envelope – the word "population" is etymologically rooted in the Latin *populus*, unambiguously referring to a multitude of *people* (and not trees). To include trees as part of the world's population suggests a condition of community among trees and people. We congregate with each other in an interchange of ecological interdependence. We need trees, and trees need us not to deforest (or *depopulate*) them. Such messages permeate Berlier's work.

While in residence at the San Francisco city dump (a definitive non-forest), Berlier produced *Reclaimed Time* (2012), a wooden sculpture that mimics the interior cross-section of a tree. Each ring was turned from a separate source of salvaged wood, giving rise to a composite creation, each ring marked by a discrete temporality contained and conveyed through the grain memory of the individual tree from which the wood was sourced. With this gesture, Berlier shakes up time, and in creating her aggregate tree disk she casts herself as a latter-day arboreal Frankenstein, recycling wood parts to reanimate a whole. *Reclaimed Time* is both absurd and uncanny, conveying a sense of disjuncture – its woodiness compels us; it feels as though it might somehow calibrate a temporal history, but it refuses to do so – or it does so too much and in too many directions. Berlier is not the first artist to reproduce a tree disk. For *Vertigo*, Hitchcock cast Big Basin Redwoods State Park to play the part of Muir Woods National Monument, and he had a replica of the redwood cutaway in Muir Woods made to trigger Novak's reverie. Although *Reclaimed Time* only marks a nonlinear surfeit of time, we stand before it like Kim Novak, temporal cartographers trying to find our proper place within it. We can't help ourselves.

Berlier's temporal objects suggest that, for her, the act of making is in itself a mode of marking time, a circular effort in which making marks time and the objects that are made tell stories about temporal existence. *Cutting Up to Build Down* (2012) is a small table-like construction, a thick redwood disc propped up on three spindly legs that appear to have been cannibalized from a rickety thrift-store end-table. Working its way along the fissure of a crack in the redwood disk is a miniature saw, barely longer than the slab of wood is thick, ratcheting up and down, appar

ently on its own. It takes mere moments, however, to notice the hulking piece of machinery that hangs below the table top, a crude, jerry-rigged mechanism that animates the diminutive saw and makes a racket in the gallery space. Berlier has made no attempt to minimize or mask the presence of the noisy, bulky machine. On the contrary, it is effectively the fourth component of the piece, the literal embodiment of an underlying mechanism, a metaphor for the conceptual constructs that percolate within our apperceptive systems, working overtime (over time) to make sense of the world as it floods in.

Cutting Up to Build Down churns out meanings like a Zen koan as told by Rube Goldberg. As with the world's tiniest violin (mimed by an unsympathetic friend), with its failure to create an empathic soundtrack, Berlier's tiny saw initially comes off as a diminutive monument to failure. However, if we read the piece as a narrative, a miniscule hand-saw sheering away at a vast expanse of wood in real time, there is actually no indication of resolution. We find either a Sisyphean myth of perpetual failure or a heroic fantasy of an underdog beating the odds. The work serves as a treatise on the mechanics of the unknown. We are only given process and left to imagine outcome.

With its elliptical associations to Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), *Cutting Up to Build Down* reminds us that Berlier's work is often and perhaps always fundamentally about making as an ongoing process of becoming or coming into being, akin to Gertrude Stein's use of the term in *The Making of Americans*, the notion of making occurring in a perpetual now, in what Stein called the "continuous present," such that the piece does not merely present an image of a saw, but rather it represents the ongoing action of saw-ing. At the risk of offering a comparison that works like a tiny saw attempting to cut into a massive slab of redwood, I will propose that Berlier's small, odd sculpture, with its refusal to provide narrative closure, has the power to expand our sense of time much the way the Long Now Foundation has done with its ongoing project, the *10,000 Year Clock*, a massive chiming time piece housed within the core of a mountain.

Berlier's *Untitled (Clock Hands)* (2012) is a series of six cyanotypes, luminous white spaces bearing the blue imprints of clockish forms, circles overlaid with multiple clock hands, suggesting an engaged awareness of time, pointing to an array of nows. One of the "clocks" displays as many as forty-five hands that coalesce in a density of indigo and creates the impression of an ultrasound image, almost womblike, a gestating temporal form surrounded by a pale wash of amniotic blue. According to Berlier, the works are designed to spark associations to antiquity's timekeeper, the sundial – and the solar component required to expose a cyanotype traces the lineage of time-telling back to the sun itself. Berlier's non-specific circular forms radiate in the gallery space as symbolic suns.

In my own kind of *Vertigo* moment, I was once trapped in an elevator in New York City with some Tibetan monks. They told me they were in the process of working with some digital designers at Cornell University to develop a three dimensional rendering of the Kalachakra Mandala. They explained that although mandalas are rendered in two-dimensions, they are intended to invoke the perception of multiple dimensions. Berlier's multi-handed clock cyanotypes are mandalas too, positing the very idea of time as existing in multiple dimensions, a kind of thick time – or architectural time. Indeed, they can easily be read in architectural terms, for surely the subliminal message of the cyanotype is the blueprint, a two-dimensional diagram, a visual equation that guides our minds to see in multiple dimensions. A blueprint is an instru

ment, an object whose function is to bring another object into being, to allow something else to be made. Berlier's untitled clock hand cyanotypes, with their reiterated arrows in all directions, seem very much to be pointing elsewhere.

With its twenty-four individual cyanotype prints of toy railroad tracks set on the floor in a contiguous circle, *Standard Time* (2012) serves as a kind of conceptual clock. The railroad tracks reference the impact of the first great railroads in the middle of the 19th century on the synchronization of time, a temporal worldview that undermined an experience of time determined by the sun's cycles. Each print, with its variables of density and coloration, marks its own hour, a visual codification reminiscent of Monet's haystacks that were painted at different times of day. Berlier's multiples, with their subtle tonal and textural differences, also forge associations with Andy Warhol, reframing his painterly/mechanical reiterations as incremental time shifts.

Berlier's repetitions of clocks and train tracks (like Andy's multiples of Liz and Marilyn), with each of their iterations posited as another moment in time, can be seen as an accumulation of static images on the verge of cinema. As Warhol and Christian Marclay have made clear, charismatic objects like the Empire State Building, clocks and train tracks can also be movie stars. Perhaps it is no coincidence that one of the earliest theatrical films featured an on-coming train. As a mechanism of motion and time, the train is a "mechanical double for the cinema." The Lumière Brothers' *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* was first screened in 1896, less than fifty years after the institution of standard time – as the train pulled into the front of the frame, audiences cried out and fled in fear. Another half-century later, writing about Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951), Jean-Luc Godard stated, "Space is the impulse of a desire, and time its effort toward completion." With a staggering economy of means, and parallel to Godard's spatially-derived equation, *Standard Time* manages to ping over a century's worth of temporal consciousness.

The hunks of tree portrayed in the fourteen cyanotype prints that make up *Untitled (Tree Cookies)* (2012) were scanned from samples that were acquired by Berlier on visits to the Laboratory for Tree Ring Research at the University of Arizona in Tucson. The specimens are rendered in white against rich depths of blue. The samples include several near-perfectly round whorls that read as solar, voids of light that appear to almost glow as if backlit, celestial bodies free floating in a cosmos of deepest blue. The other forms appear less geometric, more organic, also somehow bodily but of earthly origin, luminous MRIs of living tissue, cross sections of organs, skin – forensic evidence. The cyanotype's palette sustains a tension of separation between (blue/white) image and (brown/green) referent. We are connected viscerally to the source through compelling visual detail (nubby bark, swirling wood grain), but there remains an unbridgeable distance. With their unrelenting two-dimensionality (*blue dimensionality*), the cyanotypes communicate that they are irrevocably not-source. This distancing fuels the distinctly elegiac tenor of the piece; none of the tree species represented in the series still exists. The prints ache with displacement. They tell us here is a spot where an object was placed and, through a catharsis of chemistry and light, an outline and shape were revealed. Berlier's now-extinct tree-beings speak *en masse*: "Here I was born. And there I died. It was only a moment for you. You took no notice."

–Amy White



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