

## Sounding Board Catalogue

Terry Berlier: Restoration Artist

by Eleanor Heartney

In the wired lifestyle, glowing devices contain all that matters of reality. Within their sleek plastic frames, time is collapsed, stilled, accelerated and rewoven, while space is at once small enough to fit into your hand and as infinite as the universe. In this brave new world, old relationships between mind and body, self and other, nature and technology, and inside and outside disappear, replaced by the mesmeric attraction of eye to screen.

The new digital conditions of life have opened up new vistas and new possibilities, but at a cost to certain aspects of our humanity. Terry Berlier is a salvage artist who provides tools for recovering and reanimating our faltering connections with self, community, nature and society. She reminds us that networks are not just webs of digital synapses, but the underlying conditions of our life in the world.

Salvage operates in her work in a variety of ways. On one hand it is the literal material of sculptures cobbled together from found objects and recovered detritus whose previous lives cling like immaterial auras even as they are repurposed to new ends. But salvage is also a larger state of mind underlying Berlier's work, underscoring the essential role played by history, social relations, cultural memories and environmental conditions in the creation of our identities. In her work we are reminded of the fragility of our ties to a natural world whose long standing rhythms are being disrupted by industry and thoughtless human intervention. She also offers humorous metaphors for the need for human cooperation with machines that require coordinated joint effort to operate properly. Along similar lines are numerous works based on music in which the interweaving of sounds becomes a metaphor for harmonious (or dissonant) interactions within human communities. Other works use scavenged materials to explore the unraveling of the American dream, the recklessness of our lust for consumption, and the conditions for love and friendship.

Berlier comes by her attachment to salvage naturally. She has affirmed the influence of a great aunt who was tree planter, woodworker, and environmentalist and a father who was a basement tinkerer. Her proclivities were further buttressed by a stint in the Peace Corps in her twenties during which, as a volunteer in Jamaica, she observed the local custom of making something out of nothing.

Berlier's work often plays off the extra-artistic characteristics of its context. For instance, one early body of work was created in response to Slatter's Court, a low income enclave of trailers and cabins sited on what was originally a traveler's way station outside Davis, California. Berlier lived there for three years after her

graduation from art school and this experience formed the basis for a body of work that includes such monuments to distressed domesticity as *GutairfatherClock (or Queertime)* – a mashup of a grandfather clock, a guitar and a TV monitor which actually makes music and *Slatters Fine Silver that is Compact and Foldable for Living Large in a Small House*. The latter, which consists of a silver table setting cut up and hinged for compact storage and displayed in a velvet lined case, suggests the contradictions between comfort and austerity embodied in the history of Slatter's Court.

More recently, Berlier undertook a residency at Recology, a San Francisco based resource recovery company that makes its space and recovered items available for artists. She created seventeen sculptures there. These ranged from *Where the Beginning Meets the End*, a round working piano sculpture that incorporated salvaged piano ivories, an Apple laptop, a Dell computer keyboard micro controller and a wooden spool, to *Smart and Final*, a shopping cart immobilized by the dried concrete that had been poured into its basket. Other works in this show included *Acoustic Locator* a large wooden construction that resembles a gramophone horn crossed with a cannon. Inspired by early military aircraft detectors, it allows viewers to locate sounds. Another work that emerged from this residency was *Homespun*, a spiraling corkscrew fashioned old banisters and turned wood fragments from a discarded home.

Following an invitation to participate in an exhibition at the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transsexual Historical Society of San Francisco, Berlier created *NFS (Not for Sale)*– which was essentially a collaboration with a now deceased Bay Area lesbian entrepreneur who operated a used bookstore from the 1940s to the 80s. Placing a pair of videos representing overt and covert expressions of lesbian intimacy behind a set of moving window blinds, Berlier's installation reflected the odd dance of private and public life in those less enlightened times.

When she arrived in Trondheim Norway for an art residency, Berlier was inspired by the extreme nature of the days and nights, which manifests itself with 24 hours of sun at the height of summer and 24 hours of darkness in winter. Taking advantage of the summer conditions, she created *When Comes the Sun*, a work activated by energy collected from a solar panel. It consists of a circular, solar-powered acoustic guitar that uses the sun's rays to play the eponymous Beatle's song at tempos that vary with the availability of sunlight.

Such works suggest the breadth of Berlier's concerns. She returns frequently to environmental issues, using her art as a way to highlight the dangerous consequences of unchecked industrial and population growth. The title of *Timeframe (61 trees per person)*, for instance, references the scientific finding that there are currently 61 trees per person on earth. The work itself is designed to stress the often deleterious impact of human activity on this essential component of the ecosphere. The sculpture comprises 61 "tree cookies", prints based on tree cores with areas burned out to reflect deforestation patterns.

These slices are mounted in frames parallel to the floor and revolve in response to movement of viewers in the room. The spinning serves as reminder of the inextricable connection between humans and their environment and the impact that our existence has on nature. A similar idea underlies *The Self Leveler (aka Tipping Point)* a rocking sculpture built around a video of tidal footage. Views of the ocean horizon sway above a swinging axe that serves a balance preventing the whole apparently precarious edifice from swinging too far and falling to the ground.

Another recurring theme is the increasingly precarious sense of domestic security in a time of social and economic change. This idea lies behind sculptures like *Homespun*, as well as the entire body of work Berlier did in connection with Slatter's Court. Along with *GutairfatherClock* and *Slatters Fine Silver*, this series includes *Rent Control*, a kinetic work in which a jerry rigged map of California is made to vibrate, scattering little plastic houses and hotels from Monopoly across the rural landscape.

Sound and music are another theme in Berlier's work. Many of her works can be played as instruments by either gallery visitors or by professional musicians in concert. Those who have made music with her sculpture/instruments include Italian composer Luciano Chessa, Swiss composer and percussionist Christophe Fellay, who used them in the 13th Annual Music for People & Thingamajigs Festival, and composer DJ Sparr and Percussionist Chris Froh, who played Berlier's sculptures as part of the Great Noise Ensemble.

Often various themes intertwine. For instance, music and a critique of social mores combine to form the subtext for *Two Pan Tops Can Meet*. In this early work, Berlier reverses a homophobic phrase she encountered during her sojourn in Jamaica. Here thrift store pan tops form speaker housings for a sound piece. She later reworked this idea to create a *Pan Lid Gamelan* that visitors could play. A similar pairing of ideas underlies a work *The Love that Won't Shut Up*, whose humorous title is a riposte to Oscar Wilde's name for homosexual love. In this work, the blast of an antique car horn is muffled beneath pillows in nesting plexi cubes. Meanwhile, in one of her most recent works, *This Side Up, Handle With Care* Berlier marries music and her interest in domestic dislocation. This work consists of an upended half scale rendition of the armature of her own home set outfitted with piano wires so that it can be played. By turning this skeletal house into a musical instrument, Berlier emphasizes the fragile nature of shelter and refuge in contemporary society. Her participatory sculpture invites viewers to understanding that "home" is an activity not a static object, something that must be made and remade through our own efforts.

With such works, Berlier pulls together multiple strains of contemporary art practice. Her projects share an interest in repurposed found objects also explored by artists like Jessica Stockholder, Jason Rhoads and Cornelia Parker. She is adept at the repurposing of obsolete technologies, an interest that also

inspires artists like Tim Hawkinson. Many of her works break the boundary between art and music— a tendency that stretches back to the provocations of dada and fluxus, and underlies the creations of experimental musicians like Harry Partch, John Cage and Nam Jun Paik. And finally, by transforming viewers into participants, she enters the growing field of participatory art. Berlier deftly weaves these tendencies together, making sculptures, installations and environments that speak to the contemporary hunger for connection, physical interaction and community with a language that is uniquely her own.

**Eleanor Heartney** is a New York-based art critic and author of numerous books and articles about contemporary art. Her work has appeared in *ARTnews*, *Art in America*, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.