



Montserrat College
of Art

MANY KINDS OF NOTHING

CURATED BY SHANA DUMONT



Montserrat College of Art Gallery

MANY KINDS OF NOTHING

August 23 – October 26, 2008

RONI HORN
DAN SENN
NANCY MURPHY SPICER
LIZ SWEIBEL

COVER

Roni Horn

*Still Water (The River Thames,
for example), Image M, 1999*
photograph and text printed
on paper

LEFT

Dan Senn

Many Pairs Sounding, 2007
microtuned tubes, paper mallet
tops, speakers, straw

ABOVE

Liz Sweibel

Untitled, 2007, wire, wax





Many Kinds of Nothing

Essay by Shana Dumont

“... *there are so many kinds of nothingness*”¹

DAVID HAMMONS

“*Even a good thing isn't as good as nothing.*”

ZEN PROVERB

Nancy Murphy Spicer

Hanging Drawing (Half Drawn), 2008
rope, wood ledge
50 pins

The sculptures and photographs in *Many Kinds of Nothing* exemplify the act of meditation. They inspire contemplation with no specific narrative or objective and unveil things that are normally overlooked. The exhibit calls for viewers to physically, as well as conceptually, engage with the artwork and be in the moment.

Meditation is, simply put, an ‘awake mind.’ It facilitates a direct awareness of reality, unfiltered by illusions or preoccupations, and lets the mind and the body consciously coexist in space and time. While often associated with religions such as Buddhism, meditation is also practiced in a secular context to create awareness of behavioral patterns and quiet the mind. The artwork in this exhibition is not associated with religion, but rather with the alteration of habitual thought processes. Meditation can consist of formal religious sessions with statues, chants and incense or arise from a personal practice. It clarifies that which separates and connects us, expanding our ability to select what occupies our mind.

Although most artwork prompts viewers to pause and reflect, this exhibit initiates an engagement of the body in space by offering new information from different angles and distances. The pieces all have implied cues to absorb them more meaningfully by shifting one’s orientation; this required motion stimulates a connection between the moving body and the questioning mind. Revelations await those who pause to contemplate the delicate wood, wire and fabric sculptures by Liz Sweibel. Dan Senn’s installation *Many Pairs Sounding* uses the absurdity of paper flapping atop open plastic tubes to create an abstract, experimental sound that engages the ears as much as the eyes. The elegant asceticism of Nancy Murphy Spicer’s *Hanging Drawing (Half Drawn)* relies on the assistance of gravity and chance. An extremely particular moment becomes universal with *Still Water (the River Thames, for example)*, by Roni Horn.

Created within the past decade, and the majority in the past year, these works of art address the search for a synthesis of personal freedom and the solace of spiritual meaning. They create aesthetic mysteries to be completed by a viewer’s own interpretations. It could be said that the pieces

express nothing, if nothing is understood as the lack of an expected event or stimulus. Exhibit participant Dan Senn refers to such ‘nothingness’ as the experience of a “perceptual muddle.” He elaborates by saying that “art which expresses nothing has a dynamic potential for expressing the most.”² Exploration and openness are guides toward expansion, and thoughts go in new directions. When the mind is awake, daily surroundings become more eloquent and substantial. As art historian Stephen Johnstone has put it, “the everyday ... exists below the threshold of the noticed and is everywhere and nowhere at the same time.”³ These artists demarcate new ways to observe the world.

The small sculptures by Liz Sweibel inhabit a proportionately immense amount of wall space in the exhibit. Their scale requires those interested in observing them to draw near. Tiny, pastel strips of fabric, recycled from other uses and tenuously sewn together, hang from an edge like miniature banners. A different series made of wire is unadorned or painted white like the wall on which they are mounted directly with no adhesive or hooks. Sweibel repurposes elements of earlier sculptures, letting the previous kinks

and loops in the wire inform the structure of the present incarnations. One freestanding sculpture is made of two found wood planks and a wire. The wire's wavy lines betray its previous manipulation, and it connects the planks by being laced through found holes on each. The rigid board and flexible wire provide an unexpectedly dramatic play of line. The planks are poised vertically at an angle from each other, and the space between them narrows toward the floor in a delicate gesture.

Shadows provide the wire sculptures with an added dimension. Varied in nature, they echo the form of the wire. The layers

at times form a composition, with subtle tonal contrasts and shadows that range from hard-edged and focused to gauzy and ethereal. While intangible, the shadows are integral to the pieces. The artist prefers to use only her hands rather than hammers, pliers, or other tools, altering the wire only minimally. Sweibel selects materials for their

specific tactile properties, and that intimate touch guides their creation. Painting the wire white, was an important step for the artist, and she said "if the wall were grey, I'd paint the wire grey."

Though the gallery walls are newly painted, any remaining imperfections are accentuated

by the sculptures' play of line and shadow, making them part of the experience rather than errors to be disregarded. It is to the artist's credit that such blemishes inform rather than detract from the composition. The sculptures demonstrate the potential that, regardless of

whether tools and materials are humble, transformation and transcendence are possible. Sweibel's work provokes an awareness of the subtleties of ordinary, simple materials and brings forth their intrinsic value.

This group of work marks a change in her methods from using her personal history for



inspiration to working in response to the materials themselves. This puts Sweibel's process firmly in the present. The current work is non-referential and objective rather than subjective. She considers the sculptures to be three-dimensional drawings that speak a linear language of gestures and subtle kineticism that becomes gradually more detectible as viewers settle into a state of relative calm. The viewing experience, as she puts it, "pushes the point of paying attention." The sculptures in effect cultivate an altered pace of involvement.

Dan Senn's artwork integrates sight, sound and motion, operating at multiple sensory levels. His installation *Many Pairs Sounding* consists of 16 tubes set upright in a bed of straw. Atop each tube rests a single sheet of paper, and within them, hidden from view, speakers emit subsonic (not audible) pulses. The materials are all white except for the hay, to austere effect. Prerecorded scores composed by the artist play from each speaker and their frequencies lift the paper, which creates a sharp slapping sound as it falls. The components look simple, but the technique is elaborate and specialized.

The zany qualities of *Many Pairs Sounding*

Liz Sweibel

LEFT
Untitled, 2007-2008
wire, paint

RIGHT
Fragile as Glass V, 2005
detail, fabric, thread
FAR RIGHT
Fragile as Glass II, 2005
fabric, thread





(one reviewer likened it to a “choir of awkward animals”), are enhanced by the straw on which the tubes are clustered.⁴ The tubes stand upright like a group of figures and emit a sequence of ripples and rattles. At times only one tube sounds, then others vibrate to a crescendo of insistent noise. The sound encourages witnesses to trace the tubes’ motion to detect a pattern or confirm the absence of a tune. The subsonic music is only audible through its kinetic effect on the paper; its cyclical motion creates a repetitive visual element in the sculpture. Sound and motion collaborate in a paradoxical, symbiotic relationship.

Senn has invented many unconventional instruments. A musician first, his form of expression became more visually motivated after he learned raku pottery, known for the varying results of the glaze on each piece. He was attracted to the chance built into its process and thereafter created instruments that push the boundaries of function and appearance to consider the effect of form, sound and motion in equal measure. He finds that disregarding the boundaries between mediums is freeing, and that “everything else is a tactic aimed at limiting human development.”⁵ The experimenta-

tion and openness of his sonic landscapes initiate novel relationships with the senses.

Though it may at first appear challenging to connect with *Many Pairs Sounding*, its humor and incongruity are aesthetic entry points. The installation has no specific content or didactic goal, but it balances sound, motion and appearance in a compelling manner. Another pioneering composer, John Cage, wrote: “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating.”⁶ Both artists situate sound to reveal its inherent properties.

Hanging Drawing (Half Drawn), created by Nancy Murphy Spicer for *Many Kinds of Nothing*, consists of a black nylon rope suspended on several large pins and a wooden ledge. The ends of the rope are fused together into a series of connected loops. A few dozen pins are dispersed in a random constellation on the gallery wall. Knots of rope hang from a selection of the nails, eventually spilling onto the floor, and tangles of it rest on the wood support, nearly hiding it. The piece appears effortless, but the process that enables the drawing involves thought and care.

Spicer’s method is apparent: rope, pins and a ledge. From afar, it speaks a formal language of contrasts: black line on a white expanse, rounded gestures converge in knotted clusters, upward arcs and downward sags. As one moves nearer to the wall, the rope is less a two-dimensional line and more a tangible, three-dimensional object with which you share space. A scattering of extra pins becomes apparent, calling attention to alternate hanging points that would radically change the drawing if the rope were moved. Spicer chose ready-made rope to focus interest on the mutability of the lines rather than how she made the piece.

The artist provided the parameters to create *Hanging Drawing (Half Drawn)*, leaving initial decisions about nail and rope placement up to gallery staff. Spicer’s concept, then, is more crucial than the execution. The manifold alternative positions of the rope lead to a critical evaluation of the current composition, and the ease with which it could change gives it a sense of impermanence. It is always a piece in progress, with the prospect of completion through conceptual engagement.

Spicer’s *Watching Water* distills the use

Dan Senn

Many Pairs Sounding

2007

microtuned tubes

paper mallet tops

Photo by Kelly Rauer

of materials yet further. It is a series of directives printed on notepads displayed on corkboards on campus and public community sites, rather than in the gallery. It reads:

Approach the water's edge
Any time of day or night
Notice where the water meets land
Stay as close as possible to the water
Without touching it
Continue as long or as briefly as you like
Return whenever you can



Highly democratic, anyone can tear a sheet from the notepad and the degree of physical and conceptual engagement is in their hands. One could just read the lines, or read and perform them, and the gallery's proxim-

ity to the waterfront makes the possibility feasible. The performance is activated by the ocean, the artist's words and a willing participant, so that each enactment varies from the next. When people perform it, their bodies amplify the motion of the water. Spicer intends to record performances of *Watching Water* as the piece evolves. She does not demarcate what aspects of the piece characterize its essence, and that indeterminacy is at the heart of its relevance.

Interaction with water is also central to the three photographs in this exhibit by Roni Horn. She examines the dark beauty of the Thames River in her series *Still Water (the River Thames, for example)*. *Still Water* consists of fifteen large-scale photographs of the surface of the Thames taken in Central London. Horn directed her curiosity toward the ominous reputation of the river as a destination that many people journey to in order to drown themselves, and how, despite its current state of pollution, it is still a beloved body of water. Photographic stills, selected from footage of moving water, provide a multitude of possible views. They arrest the ever-changing composition of the river, and draw attention to the play of light and wind on the water.

Contemplation, fear and awe are elemental reactions to large bodies of water. As the artist put it, "when you stand by a river, or really any body of water – an ocean, a lake – there's a whole history of reverie that clicks on."⁷ Upon careful review, one notices that Horn dotted the surface of the water with tiny white numbers that serve as footnotes. The numbers are subtle embellishments or static interrupting the surface and marking formal variations.

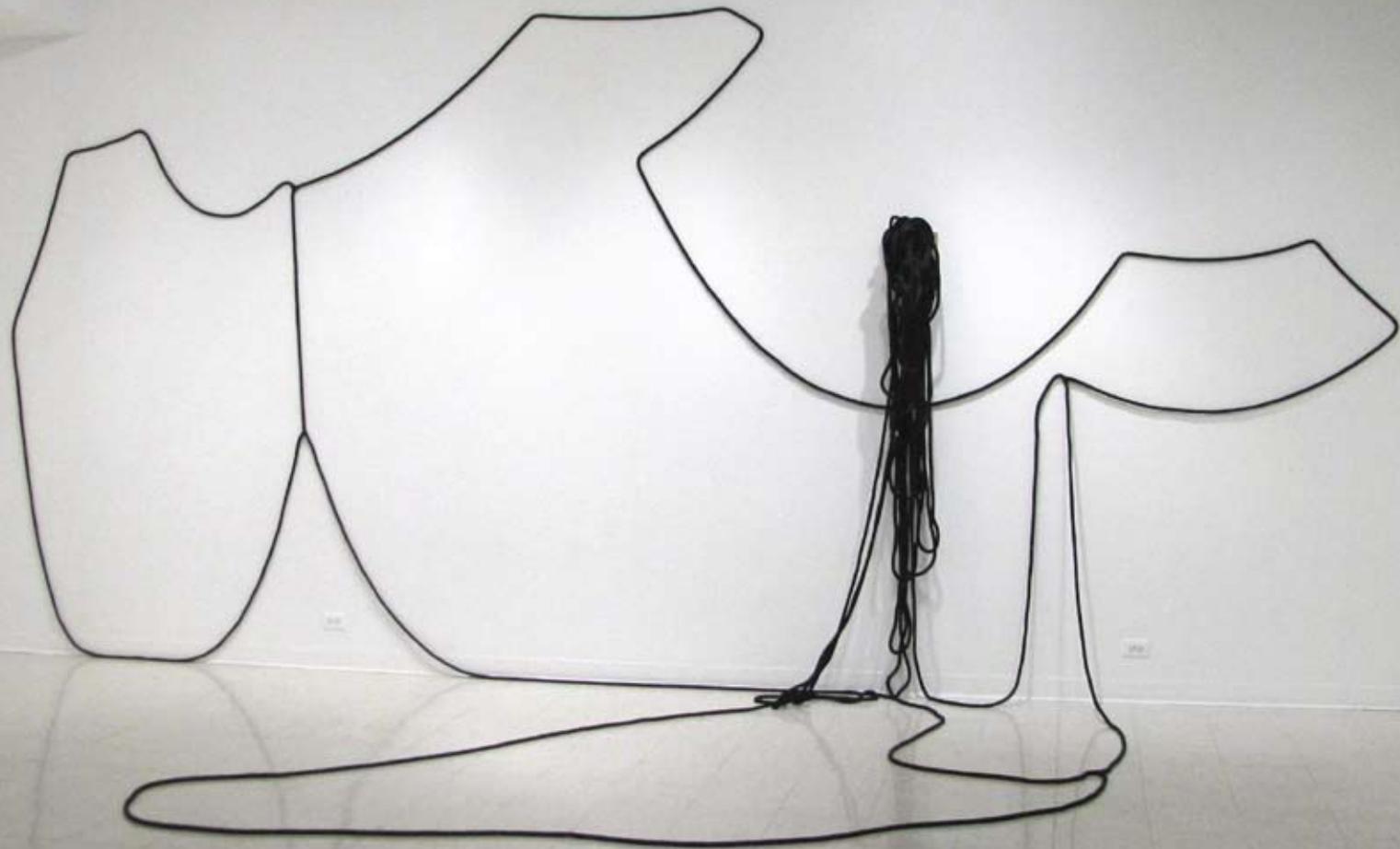
The corresponding comments are arranged along the lower margin of the photo. The associations are often specific to the shifting colors of the surface of the water, such as "is this beige or ochre?" Some footnotes are more evocative in their associations: "sometimes I look at the water and even though it's probably some heavy metal or oil coagulating on the surface it's easy to mistake it for light glistening." Others are historical and ominous: "a widow was found in the river a few days ago. A rucksack filled with magazines was still on her back." The wide range of references demonstrate the kaleidoscopic structure of the artist's considerations.

Her fleeting thoughts are diligently recorded and comments may repeat themselves a few

Nancy Murphy Spicer

LEFT
Watching Water, 2008
video still

RIGHT
Hanging Drawing (Half Drawn), 2008
rope, wood ledge
50 pins





times; as Horn says, “that’s a literal transposition of the way you think.”⁸ The meanings that Horn assigns to the footnoted points of water are alternately personal, factual or analytical.

A number of thoughts occur in the time between reading the footnote and returning to the corresponding patch of water. Horn describes this process as triangulation between the appearance of the water, the viewer’s response to the information, and her voice as transmitted through the footnotes. The observation of *Still Water* requires active pauses, experimentations with consciousness that promote conceptual expansion. Any

of the moments could have filled and flourished with ideas if given the same amount of attention. With this attitude, moments and settings that do not present any apparent activity have the potential to provide endless

amounts of stimulating content. The pieces encourage depth of thought even as they seem initially to depict only surface effects.

Following cues to look beyond that which is readily identifiable establishes new relationships with time. The connections between observation and thought may be unclear,



but provide views of the hidden present; information that our surroundings already hold but were not previously perceived. The works in this exhibit stimulate our awareness of the surrounding space. They create

suspensions of thought that interrupt our usual multitasking, goal-oriented point ‘a’ to point ‘b’ mentality, getting us a little lost along the way and thereby forging or embodying a strand of meditation, a valuable space for reflection.

NOTES

1. Schjeldahl, Peter, “The Walker.” *The New Yorker*, December 23, 2002.
2. Senn, Dan, “Pendulum-based instruments, percussive video sound art & the permanence of ephemeral public art.” *Organised Sound*. Vol. 2, Issue 3, p.160.
3. Johnstone, Stephen, Ed. *The Everyday: Documents of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p.13.
4. Nehil, Seth, “Many Pairs Sounding, An Installation by Dan Senn.” <http://www.news-ense-intermedium.com/PRESS/SNehil07.html>.
5. Senn, Dan, *Ibid*. p.152.
6. Cage, John, “The Future of Music: Credo.” *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1939 (1961), p.3.
7. Campagnolo, Kathleen Merrill, Roni Horn and Jan Avgikos, “Still Water: Notes from a Conversation.” *Still Water/Roni Horn*. Santa Fe, NM: SITE Santa Fe, 2000.
8. *Ibid*.

Roni Horn

LEFT
Still Water (The River Thames, for example)
Image D, 1999
photograph and text
printed on paper

RIGHT
Still Water (The River Thames, for example)
Image O, 1999
photograph and text
printed on paper

CHECKLIST

Roni Horn

Still Water (The River Thames, for example),
Images D, M, O, 1999, photograph and text
printed on paper, 30.5 x 41.5 inches
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth
Zürich London.

Dan Senn

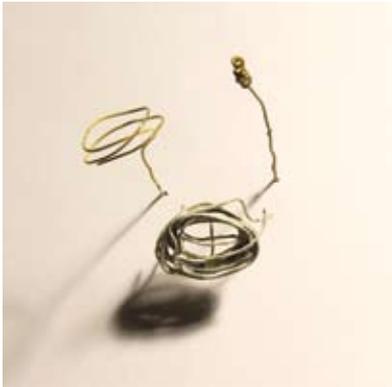
Many Pairs Sounding, 2007/2008
microtuned tubes, paper mallet tops,
sub-audio tones, straw, dimensions variable

Nancy Murphy Spicer

Hanging Drawing (Half Drawn), 2008, rope,
wood ledge, 50 pins, dimensions variable
Watching Water, 2008, 50 page notepads,
unlimited edition, 4 x 5.5 inches
Courtesy of Carroll and Sons.

Liz Sweibel

Untitled (1-4), 2007, wire, paint,
dimensions variable
Untitled, 2002, wood, wire,
76.5 x 9 x 2.5 inches
Untitled, 2007, wire, thread,
2.25 x 14 x .125 inches
Untitled, 2007, wire, wax, 3 x 2.5 x 3 inches
Fragile as Glass V, 2005, fabric, thread,
6.625 x 1.375 x .5 inches
Fragile as Glass II, 2005, fabric, thread,
2.5 x 2.625 x .5 inches



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Hauser & Wirth Gallery, Zurich and Roni Horn for the generous loan of three difficult-to-procure images from the *Still Water* series, and to Suzanne Bennett for her assistance in arranging the loan. I am grateful to Nancy Murphy Spicer, Liz Sweibel and Dan Senn for their willingness to travel to the gallery to install their work. Leonie Bradbury and Mazie Harris' assistance was invaluable to the writing of the exhibition essay and much appreciated.

CREDITS

Leonie Bradbury, Gallery Director, Curator
Shana Dumont, Assistant Director,
Assistant Curator
Jennifer Nazzaro, Exhibit Preparator
Maggie Cavallo, Gallery Intern
John Colan, Design

LEFT

Liz Sweibel
Untitled, 2007
wire, paint

RIGHT

Nancy Murphy Spicer
Watching Water, 2008
50 page notepad

Room For Rent
78-395-6645
7 Essex St
4 mile From College
Call Brenda

Watching Water

Approach the water's edge

Any time of day or night

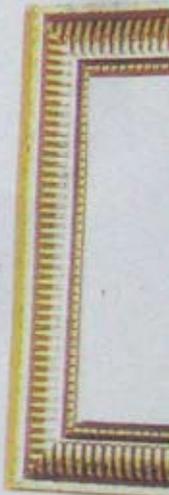
Notice where the water meets land

Stay as close as possible to the water

Without touching it

Continue as long or as briefly as you like

Return whenever you can





Massachusetts Cultural Council

© 2008

Montserrat College of Art

23 Essex Street

Beverly, Massachusetts 01915

ISBN: 0-9760851-8-6