

WHITE

EMO

UNT

Lisa Radon

Lisa Radon has exhibited at White Box, Car Hole, Worksound, and galleryHOMELAND. She curated the exhibition Reading.Writing. in 2011. Her book, Sentences on Sentences on Paragraphs on Paragraphs (2011) was published by Publication Studio. The Book of Knots, a book-length poem, is forthcoming from c_L. She is the editor of EIGHTS.

PICA's Resource Room Residency (RRR) program was initiated in 2012 in order to provide time, space, and resources for artists whose practices live at the intersection of research and art. The program encourages a consideration of libraries, archives, collections, and collecting, but can find outlets in many forms and disciplines. RRRs are provided with a modest stipend and unlimited access to our archive of books, media, and ephemera for three month engagements. They intersect with PICA's members and the community at large through salon discussions, screenings, public performances, and printed materials. The 2012 RRRs are Alex Felton, Claudia Meza, and Lisa Radon.

Published on December 4, 2012, on the occasion of Looking at some circles, in conjunction with Lisa Radon's WHITE MOUNTAIN at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art. Edited by Patrick Leonard. Designed by David Knowles.

PICA

AN

UN

Lisa Radon & David Knowles

David Knowles: One of the first things I noticed about your project is its concern with the classical problems and practices of western metaphysics. This is not ground that is being covered by a lot of artists these days. What interests you about these problems?

Lisa Radon: It is in answer to the most basic question that I return to over and over again: What matters? What matters most? A lot of my reading and researching life has to do with digging down to the roots of the thing, and then digging down to the roots of that. This is the macrocosmic version of that. When you dig down to the roots of human experience, you get to the questions of how do we think, how do we know, and how do things work. When I thought about WHITE MOUNTAIN, half of what I was thinking about is re-knowing (as opposed to re-researching). What do I know—truly know—about how the world works that I may have forgotten?

So it is less a research residency and more concerned with locating and interrogating everything that you already know—everything that makes research possible. Reminding yourself of the place you are starting from...

Well, it is absolutely a research residency. My idea about re-knowing was simply that it is all too easy to cast one's net wider and wider and perhaps forget where one's feet are planted. And yes, being brave enough to publicly interrogate some things that are beyond the pale of more acceptable discourse in this realm, things that might seem flighty or outrageous or frivolous, which is ironic because they are core to basic questions of humanness and the human experience. (I'm thinking here about entangled minds or about magic, for lack of a better word.) And to reiterate, any reading, any researching starts somewhere. With some constellation of notions or questions. But for sure I came in open and ready to read what this set of books in the Resource Room had to offer me.

Of course. Any idea of humanness has to start somewhere and usually these ideas start with humanity's relationship to the background of nature, which is another one of the threads I picked up on in your work. There's an excerpt from the material you gave me about the work of Light and Space artists in relationship to the work of aerospace engineers in southern California. I thought it was interesting that the extremities of the natural world, those that overpower our senses, are fertile material for artists to use in addressing our relationship to nature, and that this leads artists to places traditionally occupied by scientists or mystics.

There is something going on in the work-back from the experience of, say, the anechoic chamber to getting some grasp on consciousness. It is making a connection between what we experience and how it is that we are able to experience anything. How does this connect to natural

phenomena? I think it is in moving out in the other direction, tracing the connection between our conscious selves and everything beyond or outside of the self. The Pacific Ocean, for example, is so important to me. I can hardly explain this. I don't know if I am addressing what you asked, but this greater connectedness to natural phenomena is just one aspect of our connection to all things, visible and invisible. MYSTICISM. I am poking fun at myself but also so serious.

This definitely makes sense to me. The real question, the one that I am trying to phrase intelligently here, is also related to nature and perception. I've noticed an interest in natural processes of change in your work in the Resource Room. The rock tumbler's obviously, but also stories borrowed from philosophers about secret windswept mountains that crumble into the earth, the tides going in and out on your video of the Pacific—all of these elements point to a real interest, from an artistic perspective, in these processes. I'm wondering if you consider them very similar or if you think of artistic processes as a kind of accelerated nature? Is an artistic process at all like watching a mountain crumble overnight?

What a fascinating idea. It's funny because it's my nature to see change as additive rather than reductive or entropic. I am very fond of the metaphor of the coral reef, each node growing further nodes, blossoming, living. This is how I think about thinking and learning. And that, after all, is usually the subject of whatever it is I'm working on at bottom. So yes, I think of this as an accelerated moment in a lifelong process, and I think perhaps a viewer might be a passenger in a glass-bottom boat who can look down and see a little view of this much greater process/structure.

That's a great image.

It's real. Little windows. Right?

I have the word 'alchemy' written down in my notes.

It is one of my favorite words.

And there's obviously something alchemical about what you're doing here, not just with physical materials but also with ideas.

One of my favorite things about alchemy is how tilting-at-windmills it is, but that as a result of this futile attempt to transform various materials into gold, myriad discoveries were made. I also love that it was a moment when science and magic were virtually the same practice. That's something I think a lot about.

I think this is very closely related to how I understand art-making

And of course it's a metaphor for this practice, but perhaps one that is too grandiose.

A re-fusion of these fields

Yes, a re-fusion. I think quantum entanglement speaks to this. That science is suggesting that there is the possibility that some of what I might otherwise call magic, is real. What I mean by alchemy being too grand of a metaphor is that I think of what I'm doing in a very critical way. Is it enough? Is it worthy? But this is what all of the alchemists were doing: attempting,

through research, mostly alone, to understand things, to make things happen. This also gets us to the Invisible College, which is the idea that even though this research was being done by individuals in isolation, they corresponded and shared their findings. The basis of modern science, really.

This particular bit of research was very interesting to me. It points towards the problem of theory as we know it today deriving from the empirical sciences, of a universe that is presumed factual, valueless, detached. You're subverting this situation by letting real value—literary and aesthetic—float to the surface so that it glides on top of all these hermeneutic operations that we've had pounded into our heads.

Well, that's again perhaps too generous, but it's certainly something I'm thinking about. Rather than talk about theory, I want to talk about language, because it's my primary medium. And if you reduce theory down to its prime factors, it's language and idea, and of course there's debate about whether these can even be separated, right?

Sure, ideas and thought already being symbolic.

One of the things that Michel Serres addresses so poetically in The Five Senses is the human retreat from the empirical experience of the world, the sense-based experience, into a language-based experience of the world. He talks about the woman in the Cluny Tapestries retreating into a pavilion which has flaming tongues embroidered on it. She moves away from nature, from her senses, into this realm where language mediates. And there is a profound loss. By the same token, when we theorize, we move away from experience. Obvious. It is meant to give us perspective. But I think there is a loss in that we perhaps can no longer directly experience. Maybe I'm being too melodramatic. I can't even go into the whole deal about how I don't think I can write about art any more because of words hijacking the experience. That is a separate conversation.

Interesting. Language leads to a loss of experience...

Loss of primary experience, yes. In favor of the mediated experience.

I think that we still experience this loss periodically. Our primary experience happens through a rupture. It is thrust into our lives and then almost immediately dissipates. It's what we understand as trauma.

Oh, interesting.

The real inserts itself into a world that can't adequately symbolize it. We experience this as the unrepresentable. Primary experience still happens, it's just so hard for us when it does. For the most part we are living in a very densely mediated ecology.

Well, it would be illuminating to me because, as I mentioned before, it is not in my nature to think about things in this way. Here is where my brain went regarding primary experience: not to pain, but to pleasure. (I am an Epicurean for the most part.) I thought this is why the experience of the natural world is important. And why for me the ocean is so fucking important.

Can you talk more about that?

Your video of the ocean has been playing on the wall of the Resource Room for months now.

I mean, it's metaphor on metaphor for me...language-constructed, yes, but maybe even more importantly it is also this thing that just is. My experience of it is direct. It's something that could kill me easily and has tried. I've been in the ocean in the waves after a storm. They weren't ridiculously big waves, but they were big and powerful. And you just are part of it, flowing with it, being pushed, diving, and your mind empties out because you kind of have to focus on paying attention so you don't get worked. So it's this very direct experience. Or floating on your back in the sun beyond the waves with your feet toward the horizon. Again being moved by the swells, connected and not at the same time. Water is very important to me.

Did you grow up by the ocean?

Yes. This is the farthest I've ever been away from the ocean. So far.

And we're still so close

I pretend that the river is connected so that it's okay.

I want to do a bit of a 180 here. There's an important topic we haven't talked about. We are going to be making a book together. The book that we are making is a bit like a resource room in its own right.

Sure. It's invitations.

It's a library, but it's a library that indexes the activity of an individual. A library contained within a single book that contains the quirks of its creator. There is a lot of material in the book we are making about compiling and organizing information—about the Commonplace Book, for instance...

The Commonplace Book is a reflection of a reading practice, a breadcrumb trail...

Which seems to be exactly what we've made.

Yes.

Do you understand all books to function this way? Are they anthropomorphic or anthropocentric objects for you?

Sure, but also the Commonplace Book is this critical tracing not only of one's reading, but one's evolving thinking as a result of that reading. I think of books as vessels for the ideas of my dead Thinking Fellows. Mostly all dead. Not all. But what would it be like if I could chat with Lucretius? I can't, but via the book I can at least access his (and Epicurus') ideas.

How does divination factor in to all this?

Like water divining, not divining as in telling the future. The idea of letting the books tell you what they want to tell you. Looking for water by holding your palms out toward the spines and a book comes to you and it opens to a place where the book tells you something about what you're thinking about right now. This is magic. And it happens to me all the time. I love it. I was afraid it wouldn't happen in the RR. That is why I had to "set the conditions" for my experience in that space. That's why the ocean is there. Anyway it did happen. And now we are making a book.