

# Beyond/In Western New York 2010 Alternating Currents

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ALBRIGHT-KNOX ART GALLERY, BUFFALO, NEW YORK

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# Albright-Knox Art Gallery

And one day, turning the crystal about in his hands, he saw something. It came and went like a flash, but it gave him the impression that the object had for a moment opened to him the view of a wide and spacious and strange country . . . .

— H.G. Wells, "The Crystal Egg"<sup>1</sup>

Science fiction is literature's playful and imaginative answer to the alternative possibilities of our visible world. The theme of this year's *Beyond/In Western New York* exhibition, *Alternating Currents*, refers to the history of the region in regard to the pioneering citywide electrification of Buffalo in the late nineteenth century, namely the "War of Currents" between Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla, with Tesla's "alternating current" method winning out over Edison's direct one for transmitting electricity over long distances. Yet it just as easily suggests the metaphorical electricity of imagination. H. G. Wells's science fiction story "The Crystal Egg" was written in 1897, one year after Tesla's hydroelectric AC generators were used to transmit electricity from Niagara Falls to the city of Buffalo. Imagine how the city's inhabitants might have felt: transitioned from a world lit only by the finite and quickly waning light of candles and kerosene lamps, to one in which every person's home could have electric lightbulbs. Such radical change must have made the possibilities for other worlds seem limitless, dangerous, and exciting. Perhaps life felt to them as uncanny as it does for the shopkeeper Mr. Cave in Wells's fictional narrative, when, upon looking into the crystal egg, he sees it become incandescent, and through this mysterious phosphorescence appear fantastical creatures from another world going about their lives. Likewise, the best art allows the viewer to enter another world, to see, if only briefly, as did Wells's protagonist, "a wide and spacious and strange country." And, herewith, a presentation of ten otherworldly artists, two of whom form a team, featured in the Albright-Knox's portion of *Beyond/In*.

"Suffering is one very long moment," writes Oscar Wilde in *De Profundis*, after which Ken Cosgrove's five sublime lino block prints are named.<sup>2</sup> The five works—*Out of the Depths*, 1985; *Supplication*, 1989; *Redemption*, 1995; *Absolution*, 2002; and *Iniquities*, 2010—are marvels of unbridled chaos and imagination run wild. Evocative of the early Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch's elaborately gothic style, Cosgrove's works overflow with serpents, angels, demons, zombies, stained-glass church windows, architectural spaces, religious figures, historical icons, and warriors, among other images. Claw-like hands emerge

from cracked walls and crevices; angels peer upwards in supplication; serpents coil around muscular figures racing toward the sky. Like Bosch, Cosgrove uses this iconography to illustrate or suggest complicated narratives regarding faith and salvation. For him, the story is entirely personal, one of individual salvation from inner demons, reflected in the production of these utterly fantastical works. On a practical level, the prints are feats of technical mastery, a deliberate exercise in patience and quiet exorcism honed over the many years it took Cosgrove to complete them. The artist explains that he "developed a personal technique in printmaking which demanded great patience and perseverance, allowing [him] to surrender to a new belief in [himself], a new way of being."<sup>3</sup> Get lost in their depths and it becomes impossible to take your eyes away.

Likewise, the passion of infinite patience and an uncanny attention to detail reveals itself to the viewer confronted with the beautifully grotesque and meticulously drawn work of Joan Linder. Working with simple, traditional instruments and materials, such as a quill pen and a bottle of ink, Linder embarks on a journey of intimate observation and mark-making through her large-scale works on paper. As the world increasingly becomes obsessed with digital and virtual technology in all facets of life, Linder's practice offers a counterbalance to that impulse, a deliberate exercise between the alternating currents of the hand and eye, with nothing, save pen and ink, between the circuits of expression. Like the plein air painters of the nineteenth century, Linder works from life, a characteristic that becomes especially noteworthy in the context of the works shown here. "Gross Anatomy" is a series of life-size observational drawings of cadavers in the gross anatomy lab at the University at Buffalo, as well as a drawing, to scale, of the lab itself. Ever present in the series is the social, political, and personal context of the artist within her environment; sitting for months as the singular, non-scientist participant, Linder must navigate the politics of the lab, the social relationships, her existence as an "outsider," and the complex oscillation of emotions when confronted with the physical shell of a previously working body, now a life extinguished. Her work, however, is less about death than about the durational process of looking, and sensitivity to the nuances of perception and the overlooked minutiae of our surroundings.

Another artist adhering to the most traditional of artistic methods, in this case paint and a brush, Richard Huntington creates lush, expressive paintings that project an alternat-

ing mixture of harmony and disjunction through their range of form, gesture, and iconography. Seemingly incongruous sources come together in his work: Willem de Kooning's late-in-life geometric abstract brushstrokes combined with an oddly centered arrangement of fruit in *Our Lady of the Perpetual de Kooning Shapes*, 2008; Matisse's exotic style and flat, bright colors painted in an especially childlike style in *Disappointing Sunset*, 2009; or the combination of cartoon imagery and crude drawing seen in the wonderfully absurd *Zimzum*, 2010. Huntington's paintings are beautiful and his practice innovative, yet there exists in his work another layer functioning as an improvisational evaluation of the canon using art-historical sources as a form of critique. The role of painter as modernist auteur relates closely to Huntington's previous life as the longtime art critic for *The Buffalo News*. The artist has written that he wants "to make a kind of painting in which things almost jell in the old 'good picture' sense, but never quite do . . . the mix is meant to be a kind of brittle tragicomedy, pathetic one moment, sentimentally authentic the next." Humor is also woven through his practice, present in the at-times devilishly absurd subject matter of the pictures, where a passionate brushstroke reveals a sly wink beneath it. Mussolini in a pornographic embrace, evocative of Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*, or Picasso as a robotic princess—nothing is safe from Huntington's critical eye and limber brush.

Lingering for a moment longer on the art of the handmade, Penelope Stewart's installation *Apian Screen II*, 2009-10, is, quite literally, breathtaking. Consisting of opaque, gold-colored tiles crafted from molded beeswax and affixed to the gallery walls, the work first announces its presence to a viewer approaching the space with the tantalizing fragrance of honey: sweet, delicate, and entirely unexpected inside a museum. Stewart further invites her viewers to touch the rubbery surfaces of the tiles, some smooth, others molded with the architectonic formations of raised topographic maps. Conceptually, the use of beeswax suggests metaphorical connections to its many functions over time—for writing, lost-wax casting, or sealing, to name a few—while its metaphorical implications regarding the social space of the beehive evoke the Utopian architectural propositions of Antoni Gaudí, Bruno Taut, Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright. With this installation, and through her sculpture, photography, and works on paper, Stewart explores invisible and imaginary architectures and the social, cultural, and political implications of space. As a gesture, her architectural interventions are both powerful and delicate, the grand sweep of encompassing entire rooms from floor to ceiling offset by her use of fragile, organic, or natural materials. These spaces explore not only the nature of how the human body moves through space, but also how culture influences the perception of environment. The viewer enters a lost city, perhaps the beautiful interior of an ancient Egyptian tomb, transported to an otherworldly architecture of the senses through sight, smell, and touch.

Interrogations into the social and political architecture of space are also central to the work of James Carl, here filtered through the legacy of the Duchampian Readymade. For many years, Carl has questioned in his practice the division between the commercial, mass-produced, disposable object and the handcrafted "fine art" object. His past installations have featured handmade reproductions of functional objects, such as tires, toasters, or televisions, crafted by the artist in materials such as plastic or cardboard and inserted into the context of the gallery. In *White Walls*, 1998, for example, a seemingly random pile of black car tires on the gallery floor revealed itself to be artifice, the tires constructed by the artist out of corrugated plastic. In some installations, Carl's crafted objects have been further confused with their functional or utilitarian doppelgängers by being inserted into public spaces—onto the street or into a Dumpster, for instance, to be picked up or thrown away by passersby. The sculptures featured in the Albright-Knox's installation come from a series the artist began in 2005 in Paris, consisting of enigmatic, bulbous, amorphous objects mounted on pedestals and constructed from Venetian blinds, which are known in colloquial French and German as *jalousie*, also the title of the works. In this installation, evoking an M. C. Escher drawing in three dimensions, the dialectic between positive and negative space oscillates, shadows and interiors and air becoming the substance of sculpted form. Negative space becomes, in the words of the artist, a "positive and palpable constituent force: the empty interiors of these sculptures approach presence as a direct corollary of absence." These works operate as conceptual Readymades, as stand-ins for the human body *in absentia*, and as poetic and beautiful examples of drawing in space.

Mark Shepard views the ephemeral architecture of physical and social space through the alternating currents of new media and technology. An artist, media architect, and researcher, Shepard holds joint appointments in the departments of Architecture and Media Study at the University at Buffalo, reflecting his commitment to exploring the intersection of these worlds, expanding the connective webs between them, and understanding the benefits and problems inherent in an increasingly technological world. It goes without saying that contemporary culture is mediated by digital media and virtual space; perhaps it could even be stated that technology is the single most important (and problematic) development of our time. For the past decade, Shepard has been exploring what he refers to as the "implications of mobile and pervasive technologies for architecture and urbanism." Using open-source software, he invites the viewer into participatory experiences with new media networks that reveal technology's potential for expanding the possibilities of our lived environment. *Untitled (Sentient City Survival Kit)*, 2010, draws on the reality of an imminently approaching world in which "smart" technologies on the one hand offer nuanced solutions to streamlining and enhancing public interactions related to

security, traffic flow, and consumer patterns, for example, and on the other hand allow the inevitable onset of Big Brother's increasing ability to monitor, snoop, manipulate, control, and persecute the human population. Consisting of a serendipitous GPS system, a travel-coffee-mug phone, underwear that senses radio frequencies, and an umbrella studded with infrared LEDs designed to frustrate surveillance systems, the *Sentient City Survival Kit* is Shepard's intelligent, complex, and tongue-in-cheek answer to surviving this new era. For his installation at the Albright-Knox, he continues this investigation by intervening with the museum's security and surveillance system, revealing traditionally hidden footage of visitors passing through the spaces by projecting it in modified, dislocating, and at times humorous ways back into the public realm. Here, Shepard subverts and explores notions of "public" and "private," providing a catalyst for viewers to engage with the museum as an entire organism . . . a sentient city of art.

Leaving the virtual for the conceptual, Micah Lexier combines text and minimalist gesture in a self-referential practice that pulls aside the curtain on the process of viewing to reveal the construct of its ways. Not inconsequentially, Lexier, in addition to being a practicing artist, is a curator, book publisher, and art collector, multiple identities that seem to feed into his nuanced understanding of the politics of space and the workings of consumer culture. If, as Brian O'Doherty writes in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, "the ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is 'art,'" then Lexier's simple, clean, conceptual gestures deftly maneuver in, out, between, and around these apparent negations to reveal their hidden identities. In particular, Lexier's work has a kinship to that of Lawrence Weiner, a founding father of Conceptual art, evoking Weiner's early, large-scale instructional phrases affixed directly to the wall; but Lexier flips this legacy and returns to the object—here in the form of painted, waterjet-cut aluminum arrows featuring stamped texts that refer directly to their position, context, and gesture. Frequently, these interventions point out elements meant to be unseen: a closet door within a gallery space; a smoke detector; an awkward corner. Examples include an arrow with this text printed on its body: *This Is an Arrow Pointing at the Top of the Wall*, and another with the phrase *This Is an Arrow Pointing at Another Arrow*. Traditionally, arrows are used to direct the viewer toward something of importance—a restroom, an exit, the proper passage through a space. Lexier's arrows point out minute information that, by exclusion, has been deemed unworthy of acknowledgment—conceptual non-sequiturs. This renders the arrows, as Earl Miller points out in an essay on Lexier's work, "absurd in function, out of context, and metadirectional,"<sup>5</sup> and furthermore disrupts the hierarchy of the space itself, whereby unimportant spaces and imperfections suddenly become pronounced. Installed strategically throughout the Albright-Knox's upper and lower

levels, and collected in a small gallery within the exhibition, the arrows form a scavenger hunt through the matrix of the museum, a holistic gesture that ties the building together but whose reward, at the end, is only a mirror of itself.

Also conceptualists by definition, the collaborative duo of Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins has been making provocative sculpture, installations, and media art for the past ten years. Marman and Borins' roots in radical, anti-authoritarian tactics—including their integral participation in 1999 in Art System, an ephemeral, anti-bureaucratic collective that redirected funds intended for the Ontario College of Art and Design's student council into artistic agency and exhibition-making—reveal themselves in complex and nuanced ways in their current ideological practice. Their work, the artists have written, "conflates mass-produced design and communications with references that serve to deconstruct the history of political and ideological movements in twentieth-century art." Elements of design, consumer culture, art history, philosophy, and politics all become factors to be interpreted and critiqued in their work. Originally presented in October 2006 in the Toronto Sculpture Garden, the work included in *Beyond/In 2010—In Sit You*, their first outdoor installation—consists of a matching rainbow-striped park bench and mechanized billboard installed on the Albright-Knox's Elmwood Avenue lawn. Placed in the context of more traditional modernist sculptures, such as Tony Smith's twisting, geometric Corten steel sculpture *Cigarette*, 1961-67, and, by extension, paintings by Mark Rothko, Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning hanging inside the museum, the installation enters into direct dialogue with the Gallery's history of collecting and supporting modernist abstraction. The clever humor and playful irony of the work exists in its combination of high modernist ideals of abstraction with the urban functionality of a bus stop and an advertising billboard. Placed near Elmwood Avenue in close proximity to an actual bus stop, the work offers a sharp, playful commentary on the intersection of high and low culture, and a request, perhaps, that modern art not take itself so seriously.

The complex struggle between dialectical forces present in the work of Kai Althoff offers a final meditation on alternating currents for this exhibition. An installation artist, painter, musician, writer, and performer, the German-born Althoff creates work that explores the most intimate and profound notions coursing between the internal psychic and external physical worlds: love, hate, sexuality, violence, passion, life, and death. The utter poetry and beauty of his work is offset by deliberate forays into violence and degradation. Frequently he combines painted, sculpted, or otherwise handmade objects with found or collected materials, resulting in an assemblage of elements that manifests a world unique to the artist. In *Untitled*, 2007, installed at the Carnegie Museum of Art for *Life on Mars*, the 2008

*Carnegie International*, viewers walked into a blood-red room to discover a fragile, handmade doll standing before a glossy resin table with a toxic, sickly sweet-smelling pink substance churning through a central trough carved into its surface. Here, demons and angels battled it out in reality and the subconscious; eyes blinked red for many moments afterwards.<sup>6</sup> Althoff's installation in the Sculpture Court at the Albright-Knox, evoking a Surrealist carnival, comprises a series of sculptures crafted of colored resin and iron. A green lion with a yellow mane sits inside an orange-red cage whose bars reveal the Matisian outlines of figures, toes tapping along its edges, while two anthropomorphic cone-like sculptures each balance a single, torqued iron rod over their tips. Elsewhere, a woman bends backwards, her hands reaching to the sky. Althoff has commented, "Each of the sculptures represents spirits in the very sense of the word."<sup>7</sup> The word for "spirit" in German, *geist*, is something of an enigma in itself, as it can mean a number of things, all pertaining to the deepest parts of the Self: mind, soul, spirit, and ghost. Althoff's ghostly figures, crawling through the gallery in playful and dark repose, bring to mind not only the quiet and unseen spaces of the imagination, but also the secret histories of the museum and the spirit of figures who have passed through these hallways.

The spirits of this exhibition as a whole, the figures and thoughts channeled by artists in these spaces through the expression of tangible means, take on many forms: installation, sculpture, painting, drawing, photography, and media. The alternating currents of artists, objects, methods,

and philosophies—loosely grouped together under the exhibition's thematic thread, but each distinctly unique—are intended to present a rich and varied experience. To return for a moment to the science fiction story that began this narrative, it seems relevant to point out that H. G. Wells's character Mr. Cave dies in the process of looking at the crystal egg; but, not to disappoint, he goes out with a smile on his face, as if he has seen a secret the rest of us can only hope to discover. The curatorial team presents this exhibition with the hopeful notion that you experience another world but that you do, at the end, return to this one.

Heather Pesanti  
Curator  
Albright-Knox Art Gallery

1 H. G. Wells, "The Crystal Egg," in Leslie Fiedler, ed., *In Dreams Awake: A Historical-Critical Anthology of Science Fiction* (New York: Dell, 1975): 36.

2 Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons and The Knickerbocker Press: 1905): 25.

3 Unless otherwise noted, quotations by the artists are taken from statements sent to the author, March 2010.

4 This seminal essay identifies the very subjective nature of the minimalist, white-cube gallery as the *de facto* space for viewing modern art. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976): 14.

5 Earl Miller, "His Aim Is Sometimes True," in *Lexier Arrow Essays*, brochure for solo exhibition at Birch Libralato, Toronto, 2009: 6.

6 The artist Robert Smithson (American, 1938–1973) refers to seeing red beneath the eyelids in his essay "The Spiral Jetty," 1970.

7 Gedi Sibony, unpublished and undated interview with the artist.

**JAMES CARL**

Canadian, b. 1960 / Lives and works in Toronto, Ontario

*Jalousie (bole)*, 2009. Venetian blinds, 10 x 4 x 4 feet  
(304.8 x 121.9 x 121.9 cm). National Gallery of Canada.  
Photograph by Toni Hafkenscheid.



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