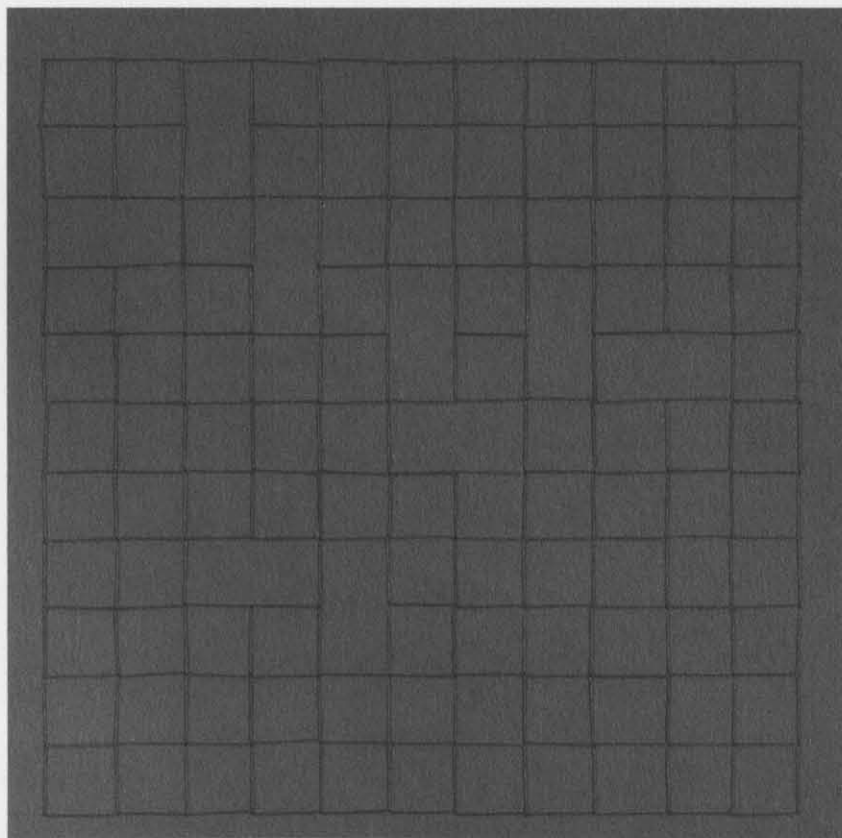


Honest Pen Hospital
Jen Bervin

She loved the sea only for the sake of its storms, and the green fields only when broken up by ruins.¹



*Embroidered Grid**
2000
31 x 31cm
thread and paper

¹ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*

Helen Mirra's materials are suggestive of drafts, models, early states. Though visually austere, her work is never slick. It retains beautifully sloppy vestiges of the making. Her unruled line wanders slightly; a hasty backstitch offers a quiet tangent. The craft is proficient but it never feels perfected. She has a deep appreciation for imperfection and variation in nature, and her own actions align with this love of anomaly.

*Craft means handiwork, a matter of hands. And these hands must belong to one person, i.e. a unique, mortal soul searching for its way with its voice and its dumbness. Only truthful hands write true poems. I see no difference between a handshake and a poem.*²

The marks of the hand are an important record in Helen's work; literally, they record her. And though it is out of vogue for an artist to say so, she doesn't shy away from describing herself as earnest. Her possessions—altered and attuned to her sensibilities—are so quietly distinctive that if a friend found something she had lost on the street he might immediately recognize it as hers. On her beloved 1930's Gibson guitar, dark brown and smaller than standard, she replaced the brand name at the top of the head stock with a brown corduroy patch bearing her initials. This kind of subtle alteration brings solace, making things both cozier and more austere. Cloth occupies a privileged place—she sewed sleeves for *Stowaway* out of woolen blankets, which reiterated the muffled sensibility of the recording itself—constructed from the sounds of a creaking ship, sailors singing in the distance, and Helen, still farther away, singing quietly along with them.

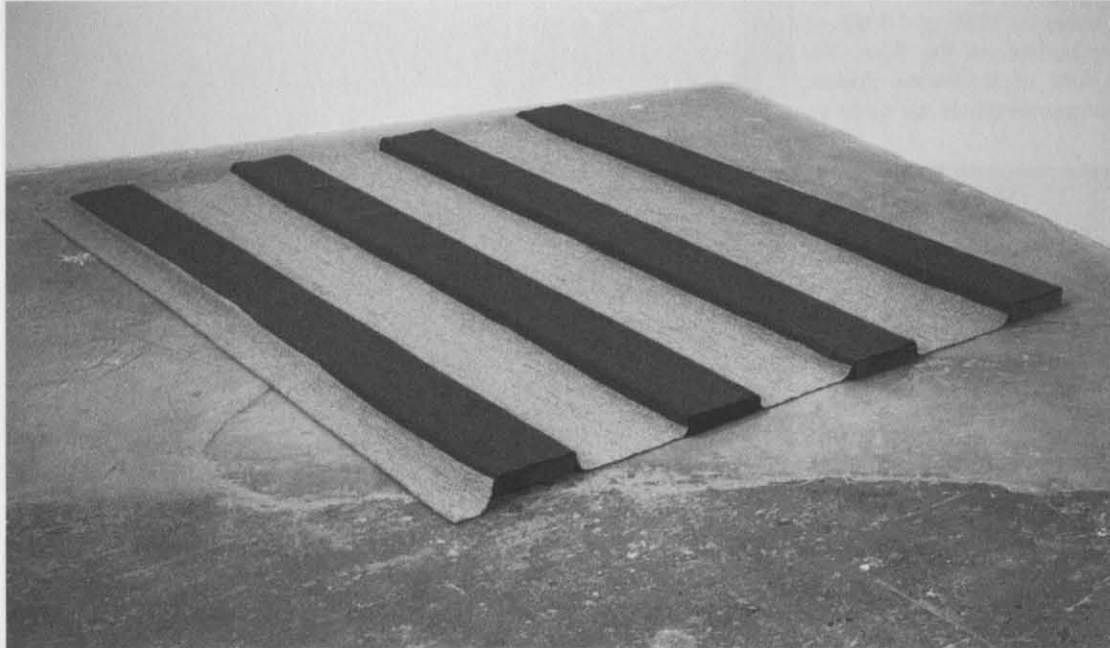


Stowaway
1996
edition of 300 vinyl records in wool felt sleeves

* The embroidered grid was one of the drawings I made for a show at Meyer Riegger Galerie, which is in Karlsruhe, on the edge of the Black Forest in southern Germany. Because of the location, I decided to make a show about being in the woods. The gallery walls were painted green, and all of the works were green, of different sorts, and were therefore camouflaged on the walls. Some of the works had text, translated into German to the best of my amateur ability, which was appropriate as the subject matter also referred to impreciseness, being lost, and walking and stumbling.

² Paul Celan, "Letter to Hans Bender," *Collected Prose*, Translated and edited by Rosemarie Waldrop (Riverdale-on-Hudson, New York: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1986), 26.

In *Sidewalk Cover*, the importance of an ordinary action, walking, is amplified by a green cover which protects and camouflages the most overlooked element of urban architecture, the city sidewalk. The blanket of beaten cotton canvas serves to remind us of what the concrete conceals and—more subtly—of our own impact on the earth. Minimalism appears to be amended, perhaps even cloaked for storage, through this simple gesture. With *Linen Corners*, squares of heavy linen are affixed to the corners of a room, heightening the austerity of the space, bracketing the stock “white box” of the gallery with the architectural equivalent of elbow patches. Or, as Laurie Palmer observed, the inert walls are poetically transformed into reinforced sails full of wind.³



Sleepers (4) *
1999
7' x 8'
undyed wool, wood

³ Laurie Palmer, catalog essay: *Seems: Integrations with the physical and social periphery of the museum*, Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, September 23 - December 10, 2000.

* Sleepers, synonym for railroad ties. I think of the activity of weaving as analogous to the building of the railroad – the building of a grid, and a labor connected to movement, travel through space (I am interested in the construction of the railroad for the same reason I am interested in sailing).

Along with her steadfast visual sensibility, Helen strives to hold herself accountable to her political beliefs. Citing Gordon Matta-Clark's desire to make space instead of take it up, she is particularly vigilant about her own toll on the environment. If you are out to lunch with her, you might notice that she discreetly returns her paper napkin to the stack it came from as she sits down, or pulls out the pair of asparagus-green chopsticks from her knapsack to avoid scrapping a throwaway wooden pair.

One need not look further than her everyday clothing to see how the consistency in her art and life is exemplified. Limited to a restrained natural palette of greens, blues, golds and browns in natural fibers, her attire conveys an unspoken solidarity with earth, sky, and sea. This spectrum of hues was displayed comprehensively in *Garanimal*, which comprised every item of clothing that she wore between 1988 and 1998—corduroys, hand-knit sweaters, and cotton, linen, and wool clothing—all folded into a long bundle on the floor. The compact ten-foot stack was a decade's clothing measured at the modest rate of one foot of well-worn clothing per year. The piece demonstrated her typical restraint—aesthetically in its palette, and environmentally in her spare consumption.



Garanimal, detail
1999
complete wardrobe 1988-1998, 1' x 1' x 10'

Research for her earlier piece, *Field Geometry*, helped lay some of the groundwork for *Sky-wreck*. This recording is constructed from a series of very quiet, textural sound recordings made with the original kindergarten materials—wooden blocks, paper, balls of yarn—layered with minimalist guitar patterns that recall the patient phrasing of Gertrude Stein's grammatical repetition. The kindergarten system was developed in the 1840's by a German crystallographer, Friedrich Froebel, who hoped to teach children the "mathematically generated logic underlying the ebb and flow of creation,"⁴ or what is poetically termed "the music of the spheres." We know Froebel better through his progeny—Frank Lloyd Wright, Buckminster Fuller and Le Corbusier—who helped establish a Modernist language with the Platonic architectural forms they first encountered in Froebel kindergartens. In discovery and self-directed play children learned by exploring the "gifts," a carefully designed series of activities. The first six gifts of the Froebel kindergarten are all solid objects—blocks, spheres and cylinders. The design of *Sky-wreck* resembles the seventh gift:

⁴ Norman Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 12.

At the Planck level, the weave of space-time would be as apparent as when the finest Egyptian cotton is viewed under a magnifying glass, exposing the warp and woof... In the 1950's, the physicist John Wheeler suggested that the Planck length marked the boundary where the random roil of quantum mechanics scrambled space and time so violently that ordinary notions of measurement stopped making sense... So great would be the fluctuations that there would literally be no left and right, no before and no after. Ordinary ideas of length would disappear. Ordinary ideas of time would evaporate. (George Johnson, "How Is the Universe Built? Grain by Grain," NYT, 7 Dec 1999)

parquetry, in which children use flat geometric wooden or paper tiles to form designs. Parquetry was intended to help children make the radical conceptual leap from the familiar three-dimensionality of wooden blocks to abstracted two-dimensional geometrical shapes. *Sky-wreck* lies in this space between the abstract and the "real" three-dimensional world of objects. The wreck is an abstraction that has the potential to become a three-dimensional patch or mend for the imagined geodesic canopy of sky. Given the reality—that the sky cannot be mended with cloth—the form functions only as poetry, a poetry that negates the need for differentiation between plane and space.



sidewalk film frame #5
1998
alkyd paint,
in front of Sally Timm's apt.
Chicago, IL



Becket, detail (actual size)
1997
cotton banding
16mm x 100'

I started making 16mm banding works while spending the summer in Bisbee, Arizona, while house sitting for Jen Bervin's neighbors. Staying true to the 16mm width of motion picture film, I sewed individual frames of sun bleached dyed cotton into 100' (a standard stock film length) bands. I think of them as silent silent films—with no picture, or text, and unable to be run through a projector. The movement of the film through the projector is shifted to the movement of the viewer walking along the work, while the long narrow cotton banding marks a horizon line. One was green (*Ranger*), and the other was blue (*Becket*). (A becket is a turn in a small creek, and of course Beckett with a missing T.) I returned to Chicago in September, and later had what was for me an epiphany, that the sidewalk had the same structure as a film. I began a project of painting one square of sidewalk green in front of the houses of people I knew in Chicago, to me signaling a film frame, and also attempting to camouflage that bit of cement. I then made *Sidewalk Cover*, which ended up looking like a jumbo version of *Ranger*.

hammocks. a nearby sailor sleeps sleeper sailor, asleep hammock. sleeping the s

Under Potemkin
detail
2000
ink on cotton banding, 16mm x 250"

*Map of Parallel 52°N**
detail
1999
dyed cotton, 16mm x 360"

* After reading about cartography and seeing multiple references to latitude and longitude lines as "imaginary lines," I decided to make one. I made a 16mm film of the 52°N parallel, at a scale of one foot of film to one degree longitude, by painting clear film leader with watercolor, green on land and blue at sea. I made a corresponding banding work at a scale on one inch to one degree. I have continued to work on this latitude project, making banding works of every seventh degree, as well as a recent film of 81°N, which is in the arctic, and therefore blue at sea, brown on tundra, light blue on ice, and white on snow, and Ernst Karel and I made a sound work of 48°N, at a scale of ten seconds to one degree.

15 Sep 00

Nationaal Schoolmuseum, Rotterdam

Thinking in spare moments about this sky I am thinking I will be making while in India. Looking forward to making paper models first. Sometimes trying to forget about sky project and think of other possibilities and always coming back to sky. Good sign.⁵



Gerrit Rietveld bench
Kröller Müller Museum, Otterlo,
Netherlands

27 Oct 00 Thrissur

I am going to start looking for a weaver for sky fabric. (200 yds.) And making models. In the Netherlands saw large Gerrit Rietveld collections, incl. beautiful sloppy cardboard wee architectural models. Lg amounts of simple math in front of me.⁶

⁵ letter from Helen Mirra to Jen Bervin

⁶ ibid.

India, where cloths were once given names such as Evening Dew, Running Water, and Woven Air, seemed a fitting place in which to weave the sky.⁷ The cloth was woven with indigo, which is native to India and the world's oldest blue dye. The cotton for the cloth was thread-dyed prior to weaving. Different batches absorbed and retained the indigo differently; when the thread was woven into cloth, the differences in color created striations in the fabric—which made the weave pattern particularly prominent. Despite its thickness, the structure of the cloth itself is somewhat fragile. It was purposely woven with twelve warp ends per inch—fewer than would typically be used with such a hefty weft thread—resulting in a “tender, heavy sky.”⁸



Loom at Auroville weaving cooperative, Tamil Nadu, 2000
the bicycle wheel below the loom is used for spinning thread*

⁷ These names refer to muslins. S.F.A. Caulfeild and B.C. Saward, “Indian Cloths,” *The Dictionary of Needlework*. (Exeter, England: Blaketon Hall Ltd., 1989, Facsimile of second edition published in 1885), 267.

⁸ HM in conversation, May 2001

* Ernst Karel and I spent the academic year of 2000-2001 living in Thrissur, a mid-sized town in Kerala, South India, while Ernst did field research on the use of amplified sound in public spaces. The previous summer in Tamil Nadu (on the other side of the Western Ghat mountain range), we had met Harish Joshi, who oversees a weaving cooperative in the intentional community of Auroville. (www.peoplink.org/imagination/introduction.html) The cooperative is devoted to promoting responsible trade and providing a livelihood for families from the least privileged communities (the Harijans, or “untouchables”). The weavers work with a dyer who learned the traditional, non-polluting craft of vegetable dyeing. Because of their political and environmental ethos, it was the ideal place to have the cloth woven, and we were able to work together despite the geographical distance.

During the three months the cloth was being woven in Auroville, Helen worked out the math and the composition for the sculpture, and got accustomed to pedaling the non-electric sewing machine. The expected "simple math" turned out to be anything but simple. At the outset, she was under the impression that all of the angles were the same and all the triangle sides were the same length in a geodesic dome. As it turned out, the complexity of the 110 interrelating triangles in *Sky-wreck* yielded only one equilateral triangle. The seams also presented a question: due to the slight curvature of the dome fragment, every hexagon the joined triangles form needed one open seam in order for the whole sculpture to lay flat.



Trikumaramkudam Temple Rd West, Thrissur, 2001

Nov 00 Reading about Thales and the Milesians—they came before Pythagoras in the 6th century bc and are considered by some the first school of philosophy—each of them had a different theory/proposal for what the material of the universe was, what the sky was made of, and it seems they didn't care who was right—they were interested in the possibilities as possibilities. And they proposed scientific explanations for thunder, lightning, earthquakes, etc., challenging the assumption of crediting such phenomena to the gods. The *skywreck* is a model of an idealized, imaginary solution for an environmental/poetic hole in the sky.

To realize a system—for instance a thought—means tuning into the thought and leaving all the rest of the universe untuned. This is done by subtracting or withdrawing one tetrahedron. (Buckminster Fuller, Letter on Tensegrity, March 18, 1982.)

What I consider the sky radius is what appears as the distance to the edge of the sky, or the sight distance to the horizon, on a clear day at sea level – which is approximately five kilometers. Eleven ended up working as the perfect number: an eleven frequency icosahedral dome is 1210 triangles (26 different sizes), and if the sky was 11 freq., chord lengths are 426-600 meters. I made a wreck/patch of 1/11th of the sky, which is 110 triangles, at a scale of 1:333. (In 1922 on the roof of Carl Zeiss Optical Works in Jena, Germany, Dr. Walter Bauersfeld, with Franz Dischinger and Dr. Ulrich Finsterwalder, built the first geodesic dome, as a replica of the sky—the first planetarium projector. It had 3480 struts, and they based their design on the thickness ratio of an eggshell to its diameter.)

To translate observed coexistences into non-observed, inferred sequences. (John Dewey)

110 triangles 330 edges 110 seams

Mit erdwärts gesungenen Masten
fahren die Himmelwracks.

In dieses Holzlied
beißt du dich fest mit den Zähnen.

Du bist der liedfeste
Wimpel.

With masts sung earthwards
the sky-wrecks drive.

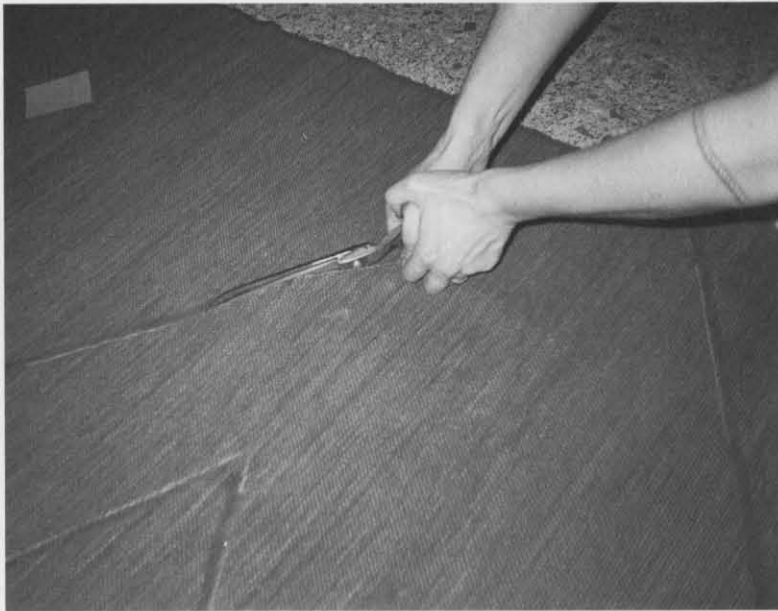
Onto this woodsong
you hold fast with your teeth.

You are the songfast
pennant.

Reproduced on the outgoing wall of the exhibition space, this poem served as an postscript for the sculpture. Celan stresses the individual as the basis of hope; the human "you" holds tenaciously to the inverted mast like a sail—a "songfast pennant." It is easy to misread the word "drive" as 'dive' in this context, but the wrecks *drive* earthwards. The descent of the inverted wreck is pointedly, explicitly intentional. As is Mirra's own when she states, "It's a wreck but I made it."

Sky-wreck's beauty lies in its brokenness, its tender geometries of ruin and mend. Looking across is like surveying an ice flow: between open seams in the matte blue cloth, jagged fissures of light glint from the exposed floor.

Racked by reality and in search of it, Mirra materializes the wreck and offers the mend.



Efforts of those who, with man-made stars flying overhead, unsheltered even by the traditional tent of the sky, exposed in an unsuspected, terrifying way, carry their existence into language, racked by reality and in search of it. (Paul Celan, "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen," *Collected Prose*, tr. and ed. Rosemarie Waldrop, Riverdale-on-Hudson: Sheep Meadow Press, 1986, 35.)

