

A Dialogue in Two Synchronous Atmospheres

Erik Morse with Alexandra Grant

Much of your art practice is informed by your childhood emigrations and the various countries you have called home. How did these experiences sensitize you to the worlds of the stranger and the outsider?

I attended seven schools during grades 1-12 in five geographies, each one completely different. Every person who migrates knows much is gained or lost in translation. Because I grew up in such an international way, I had both a sense of the fantastic world outside and a complete world of fantasy in my head.

I grew up surrounded by art — folk, modern, contemporary. My mother and father collected African art from their time in Nigeria together, and in Mexico my mother's close friend was the sculptor Helen Escobedo. As a child I found the presence of their art comforting because it didn't speak to be understood. I still associate

X began counting in English...

...but the words unfailingly metamorphosed into French. As long as she could remember, language had always been merciful, employing a farrago of sounds and colors and patois. One, two, three... quatorze, quinze, seize. The boxes of books numbered more than thirty. Trente.

Obsessed with efficiency, the books had been organized by size within the cardboard, and so grouping them again by subject matter and alphabetizing once more gave the unpacking a weight she had only experienced psychically at her Jungian therapist's office. It was the books of fiction that were the heaviest. X pulled out each volume, stacking it first on the ground to get a sense of each letter (K for Kafka, Karon, Kerouac, Kincaid, Kurieshi, et cetera). The small book, bound in green Venetian paper, swirled eddies of pigment, had no identifying title or author on either cover or spine, and so she opened it haphazardly to a central page and read:

"Midway through its voyage across the Atlantic, a piano's keys began to plink dissonant messages in the rocking hull of a cargo liner. The clattering sounded tentatively to begin, lost in all the various creeks and tintinnabulations of its mother vessel, which plowed violently ahead, face à face with the gurgling sea.

“The piano, a simple mahogany vertical built by the firm of Waddington and Sons, London, in the 1920s, spent most of its life along the Massachusetts littoral, nestled inside a Italianate house that was adorned with a Widow’s walk; it had listened patiently to family recitations of *Moby Dick* and *The South Sea Tales*; it understood the thingness of the sea, the unknown, the terror, the weather of it. The instrument had made identical journeys from the Old World to the New four times hitherto, gaining with each expedition another layer of salty residuum over the spruce soundboard, the results of which had imparted a warping and funereal timbre to its string articulation:

*Bwah-bwah-bumwah.
Bwah-bwah-bumwah.*

“The notes chiming through the orlop deck’s mossy ether approached the purlieus of melody, something redolent of a sailor’s chantey or barroom chanson. Undulating to and fro beyond the ship’s steel bulwark, the ocean’s metronome accompanied at an esoteric tempo, at moments soft and pliant like a lullaby, and other times savage as if threatening to pitch the horizon permanently onto its side.”

In these words, X felt a surfeit of nausea, forming at her center and spreading outward toward her clavicle and hip bones: “Why was this so familiar? Was this Jules Verne?” And then she flipped to the front of the cover and saw the inscription: CHERE X
___ LOVE, K.

What kind of communication was this between them, and why now? Why had she waited to read the book? She turned past the inscription to the title page, resting for a moment on the quote:

Water engenders skin, it is actually and ultimately the same surface.

Roland Barthes, Michelet

and began to read. Was it K who had introduced her to Barthes? As she sat legs crossed on the concrete floor, the cold seeping in, the piles of books nonetheless surrounded her in a tenderness of being “entre guillemets” as if “under covers,” of darkness or a lover’s embrace or sunk in the endless integument of the sea between them.

X remembered who she was: an artist, a sculptor, and began rooting around in the depths of her discomfort in the only way she knew how. She made the first drawing, a boat with a piano, just as described in the book, but, as in a dream, with

home with certain objects (rather than specific places), like the Mexican paintings of my grandparents’ or my mom’s piano, which crossed the Atlantic five times in my childhood. This rootlessness and yet dedication to material culture has no doubt been part of my becoming an artist.

Did your creative fascinations with concepts like “telepathy” and “otherness” lead to a particular interest in French literature?

My Francophone interests preceded my art practice, as I lived in Paris as a child; my mother was in charge of the Fulbright Program between the U.S. and France, a program she had also run in Mexico City. My French was never native, but experiencing the metro and the food and the inclement fall weather as a 12 year old gave me a kind of cultural fluency that led later to a desire to reconnect with that experience. When I went to college, here in the U.S., Derridean theory was *de rigueur*, and I felt quite excluded by it in the classroom.

It wasn’t until many years later, in London, when I was looking for an appropriate graduate school that the American artist Jeffrey Gibson introduced me to the writing of Hélène Cixous. It was as though her writing was the magic word, the telepathic message that would both make sense of and open up the worlds of French literary, philosophical, and psychoanalytic thinking. At the same time it provided a grounding context in terms of her Feminism and hybrid

Erik Morse is the author of *Dreamweapon* (2005), and *Bluff City Underground: A Roman Noir of the Deep South* (2012). He is also a lecturer at SCI-Arc and a contributing writer to *Frieze*, *ArtReview*, *The Believer*, *Paris Review*, *LA Review of Books*, *Bookforum* and *The Guardian*.

Erik Morse

background as a German, Jewish, North African, and French woman.

I'm struck by this image you mentioned of a piano crisscrossing the ocean as an apt metaphor for how your work details the emotions of "atmosphere."

Yes, in that image the piano is mute but yet we can still hear it in our heads...how it has played, how it will (hopefully) play again. It reminds me of the sadness of the movie *The Piano*—poor Ada McGrath, getting shipped off to the ends of the earth (New Zealand), sold into marriage by her father. The final scene, as she throws the piano overboard, into the sea, to commit suicide, and then changes her mind underwater. Why is it so often in stories that we must go down or underwater to reveal the truth about ourselves?

Do you think artists living on a coastline like L.A. are more attuned to telepathing to the outside?

Do you think it's the ocean's shore that makes us more attune to nature here, or is it the tar bubbling up through the earth, or the sense of the tectonic plates moving under our feet?

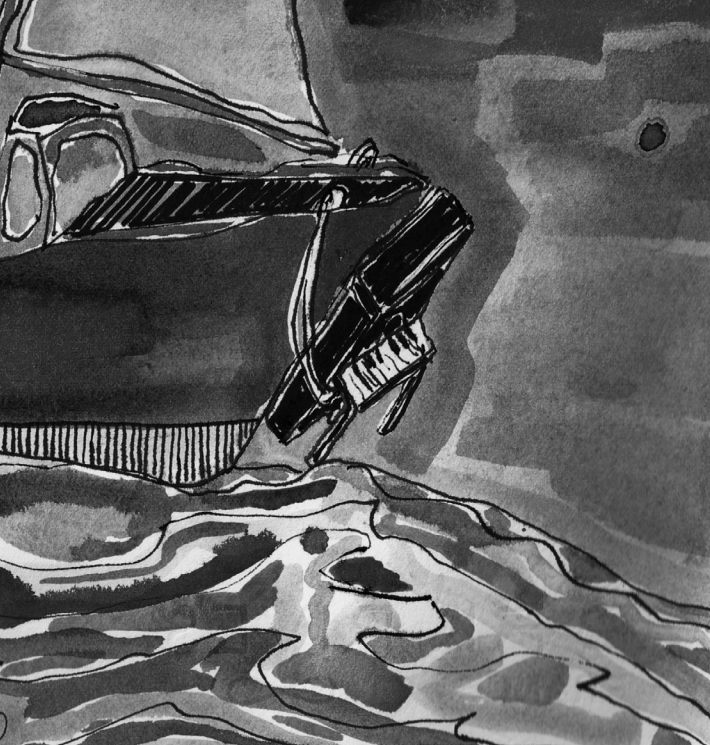
Despite being a text-based artist, many of your exhibitions, like *Womb-womb Room* (2011) and *Interior Forest* (2013) take on a strong, experiential dimension.

Much of my early work in drawing was sculptural. I used to weave large-scale webs of language in wire filigree and create what are almost unphotographable masses of this material. Over time, my practice shifted: the wire then moved to the wall, where I traced its shadow, then to paper, and then the work lost the wire altogether.



the piano strapped to its bow. She remembered her father's obsession, at the end of his life, with Atlantis. No, not that he believed in it, but he had been both a geologist and a follower of Rudolph Steiner, an anthroposophist, and struggled to reconcile the two. Not much had been known about the earth in Steiner's days. That its crust moved up and down was accepted, but not side-to-side on plates, as we know them now. She remembered her father explaining the early naval missions from England, plumbing the depths for the first time with piano wire two to three miles in length, astonished at how deep the sea was.

X came to and looked once more at the book in her hands: entire oceans of prose yet to be spanned, an imaginary voyage, a zigzag. But it wasn't hers. She thought to herself that maybe she could perch her ear between the pages, listening to it like a conch shell. Perhaps she would hear K's words beckoning her like a susurrant piano playing against the tide. What things would K share? No doubt, they would arc fitfully between heirlooms of childhood and of their affair. And then she started laughing. Waves of laughter rose up from her belly. She couldn't help it. The book fell to the floor.



With a histrionic flair of her hand, X cleaved the book down its center as though she were parting the Biblical child in half.

She caught her breath...as she sat up and observed that the book's pages, now clustering into distinct bands emerging from the spine, took the shape of the letter K turned upon its side. She closed the text with an air of finality and sealed its green skin with a saltwater kiss.

What was new about the *Womb-womb Room*, which was originally commissioned as a piece to “recreate” or “re-enact” Faith Wilding’s *Crocheted Environment* (1972) for a Pacific Standard Time exhibition, was that the source for the idea came from another sculpture. The two things that became essential were the use of color and how I addressed what feminism was today, which I did by asking artist Channing Hansen to collaborate with me. It took us almost a week to install the *Womb-womb Room* at Night Gallery, with up to 11 artists and volunteers all sewing this giant web together, listening to music.

It was that collective hum that made the idea of the collaborative drawing of the *Interior Forest* a possibility. H el ene had given me her book, *Philippines*, in 2009, and for years I had mulled over how to embody the work. As a reader, I immersed myself in the ideas in the text— Jacques Derrida’s obsession with Freud’s redacted writings on telepathy—but as a maker I knew that the responsibility of giving form to H el ene’s text was too great.

I still relate so profoundly to her voice. My real relationship to H el ene grew out of that initial sense of connection and correspondence through reading her texts. When I first met my long-term collaborator, hypertext pioneer Michael Joyce, in person over dinner, he commented about the way that I spoke, that I was a “Cixousian.” It’s interesting how we recognize each other, isn’t it?

Alexandra Grant is a text-based artist who uses language and networks of words as the basis for her work in painting, drawing and sculpture. Grant is known as a ‘radical collaborator’—it is collaborating that shapes what she does outside of the studio as much as within it. Grant has worked with writers as diverse as hypertext pioneer Michael Joyce, actor Keanu Reeves, artist Channing Hansen, and philosopher H el ene Cixous.

Alexandra Grant