

MANY KINDS OF NOTHING

Montserrat College of Art Gallery • Beverly, MA • www.montserrat.eduDan Senn; *Many Pairs Sounding*; microtuned tubes, paper mallet tops, sub-audio tones, and straw; dimensions variable; 2007/2008.

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that art is basically play. And let's say that in its playing, art isn't very important unless, as part of its interior system, it shows itself to have exterior value. One way that art has exterior value is through its capacity to orient—or even re-orient—us to matters of some consequence within our lives. In some writing on art, we read descriptions of the work of artists who challenge our assumptions or our perceptions, or who explore issues of identity, or even who investigate the limits of whatever may have been limited in some uncertain way.

Art seems to have surrendered its playfulness for a more urgent utility, a redeeming value, perhaps a moral edge. Has it become a requirement for art to have an instrumentalist function? It is interesting that the word "art" is modified by its perceived performance, as in the art of X investigates the merger of memory and place or Y's installations question anatomical hierarchies. These approaches to art want art to shape, dress, and deliver findings, or to crack codes for the sake of so-called meanings or accountabilities—the socially redeeming values.

When we actually look at art, we may or may not witness a parade of meanings. The performance of meaning as the value of art may be evident, but it may not be what the art

object is. *Many Kinds of Nothing* presents work that manages to avoid (rather well) the performance anxiety that buggers a lot of instrumentalist art, because of the apparent willingness of the artists to play. Play can be understood as an act done for its own sake—its interior merit; or, exterior value may be directly linked to an interior system that is itself valuable.

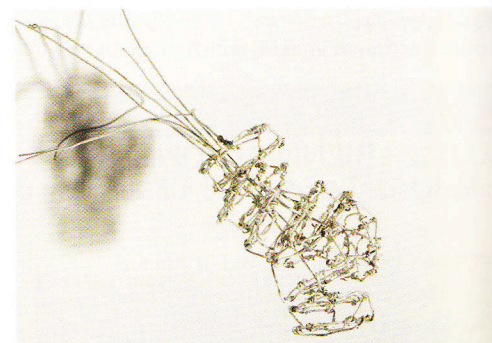
Dan Senn's *Many Pairs Sounding* is a construction of microtuned tubes with paper mallet tops arranged on a bed of straw. Relying on subsonic speakers hidden within the system, the tubes emit odd, pulsing sounds that suggest nature without being natural. *Many Pairs Sounding* plays funny and is even fun, although it relies upon a staged, visual setting—the straw feels like a structural compromise.

The tiny and fragile sculptures of Liz Sweibel are structures of fragments, wire, fabric, and thread, joined and placed at odd heights on the wall, with the exception of the larger (seventy-six inches) *Untitled* (2002), a freestanding, wood-and-wire piece that, like its smaller cousins, insists upon our attention. As delicate and modest as Sweibel's work appears, it is extremely and tenderly alluring. It is an art of unsentimental discards, worked together into little monuments of poise and touch. One imagines the fingers in their own imagining as the pieces are constructed.

This work does not worry about its significance; rather, it quietly maintains its own small breath and shadows.

Hanging Drawing (Half Drawn) (2008) by Nancy Murphy Spicer is a wall-sized sprawl of heavy, black rope draped over small pins and a wooden ledge. The pins appear to have been randomly placed and are not all used, as some of the rope remains looped on the ledge. The piece is a partially done drawing with an implied set of alternative arrangements that might depend upon a mood shaped by gravity, the rope itself, and the energy at arm's reach. *Hanging Drawing (Half Drawn)* is a big physical event, a pouring of odd catenary arches that drape to and across the floor in a stop action of self-description.

Relying upon another descriptive premise, Roni Horn's photographs of the surface of the Thames River are opportunities for an intersec-

Liz Sweibel, *Untitled*, wire and paint, 4 x 3 x 3½", 2007/2008.

tion of visual and narrative brilliance. The three images in the exhibition from a series called *Still Water (The River Thames, for example)* are essentially footnoted photographs. Horn inserts barely noticeable numbers in the dark and light patterns of the water's surface and a series of numbered notes at the under margin of the photographs. The notes are at once ominous (about finding bodies or body parts in the river), poetic, speculative, and sometimes just funny. Horn's work requires a slowing down. One is drawn to the image, then the notes, then to figuring out the connections between them, which are likely impossible to find. The pleasure in this work is its mysterious flirtation with meaning and its fluidity. By conditioning the viewer to her own point of view, Horn generously trusts the certainty of the variation or opposition that must follow.

—David Raymond