

# Metropolis M



## "This is my interest anyway - to not-demand" - Interview with Helen Mirra

08.09.2017 | FEATURE — Zoë Dankert

Precisely formulating her sentences, Helen Mirra is answering my questions, guiding me through her work and ideas. We meet in Amsterdam, where we follow its canals while enveloped in a conversation that touches upon walking, weaving, chance and care. “Helen Mirra is a walking experiment”, reads the biography on her website. Walking is central to her practice since she decided ten years ago that if she wanted to continue as an artist it would be through walking. Andriessse Eyck Galerie sent her an open invitation for a pair of shows this summer and fall. *Variable Weather* was installed in June, and *Voluntary Weathering* will open September, 9. We met after the summer show opened, and just before Mirra left Amsterdam to set off on a journey from Amsterdam to Meran, Italy, by foot and by train.

**Zoë Dankert: You have made walking a core principle of your artistic practice. The renowned Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh “What is walking for? Walking is for nothing. It’s just for walking” is quoted on your website. To you walking and making art go hand in hand, yet I am curious what it is that attracts you to walking?**

Helen Mirra: It is an unskilled activity, and a modest activity, and a free activity, and an always-available activity, and an equipment-free activity, and an active activity.

**The materials you use in your work appear to be natural or taken from nature. Yet, you told me that the artworks do not mirror or strive to be a recognizable representation of a certain landscape. What (if any) is the connection between a specific work of art and a specific walk? Do you collect material or ideas along the way?**

For a while it was quite explicit, the relationship between the working and the walking – I brought materials with me in my knapsack, and the work was completed within the day or series of days of the walk. Some of the walks have the title “walking commas” – this is because they were made in pauses along a walk. As in the quote you mentioned, walking is for nothing – so while I observe materials and ideas along the way, I generally resist collecting them – rather I try to note them, and continue along. Then in the studio I am aware that the walking has affected me, and I value this, and I work from that place. These days my key question is, Where am I? It isn’t a question I try to answer – rather I just find it a good question.





**The weather takes up a prominent role in your work and seems to point to the unpredictability of the universe and the need for human beings to adapt themselves to their surroundings. What does the weather mean to you and how is it related to your artistic practice?**

I love weather. I live in the weather. I don't try to change it - and of course it changes. I don't try to get away from it. I pay attention to it. I respect it. One could also say, I am weather. That sounds more strange, but it resolves the need to explain the relationship.

**You have a profound interest in taking care of things. Your work seems to point to an awareness of ecological matters and to the loss of the art of stillness in contemporary society, both much discussed issues in the arts and media these days. Do you feel a responsibility towards the planet and humankind in this sense?**

I do feel responsibility – to take care as best as I can of all beings and things. And rather than thinking of generalities, like the planet or humankind, I like to think of myself as a pragmatic, so taking care tends to mean taking care of the beings and things that I meet day to day – it is personal, so to speak. And it can sometimes mean not-doing something.

**Between exhibitions this summer, you are undertaking a journey to Meran, Italy, by foot and by train. Could you elaborate on what this entails and how it is connected to the artistic practice of Douglas Huebler and André Cadere, whom you mention in the notice, and the notion of chance?**

I had to get from Amsterdam to Meran and I had about a week to do so. I realised the possibility of the activity that was an alternative version of Huebler's hitchhiking project.[1] The reliance on the train nods to Cadere, and to the complete misunderstanding of his work by Harald Szeeman, curator of *documenta 5*, who invited Cadere to participate on the condition that he would travel to Kassel, Germany, by foot - and in a way celebrates the failure of Szeemann to control Cadere.[2]

Like neurological connections, everything is connected to everything else, but some synapses are stronger. So I've a particular solidarity with these artists who walked around, also including Stanley Brouwn, who had practices that were not separate from their everyday life, while still definitely making so-called artworks. And they also share sly senses of humor. And, apparently, they were not ambitious. In not trying to get something, there is an openness to whatever might happen in a directed, yet uncontrolled situation, and this is the embrace of chance as a core principle.



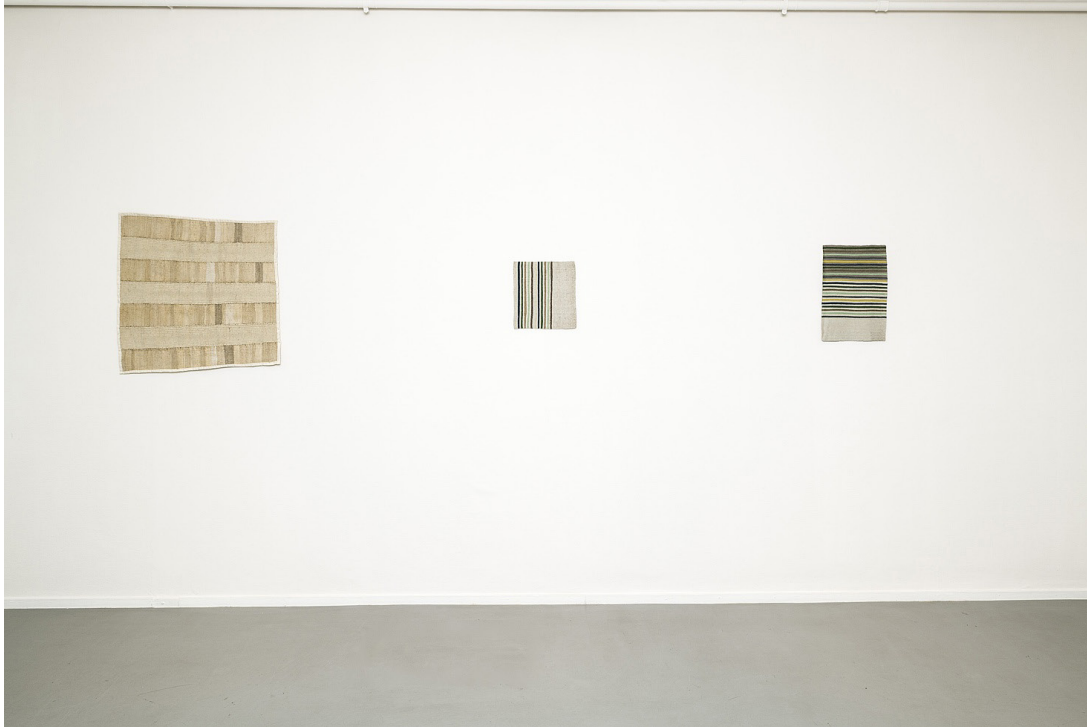


**Stanley Brouwn, André Cadere and Douglas Huebler are all considered to be conceptual artists. Is the label 'conceptual artist' also relevant to your practice?**

I'm not sure about Stanley Brouwn, but I think that at least both Andre Cadere and Douglas Huebler distanced themselves from this categorization. I appreciate that the term is a reminder that conceptual thinking is one of our sensory activities, and it is nice because it doesn't exclude the others (seeing, listening, etc.), nor does it assume or prioritize any of them. All three of them were certainly as engaged with everyday somatics – with the physical, pedestrian body – as they were with abstract ideas.

**In an earlier conversation you mentioned the presence of a structure as the premise for freedom. During Variable Error you left the activity of the day to chance by flipping a coin every morning that would determine if you would continue your journey by foot or by train that day. How is this idea of the structure as the creator of freedom related to your practice?**

Does it become obvious why operating within a structure allows freedom if one defines freedom as being free to be, rather than free to choose? So many decisions that we make are unimportant - shall I go left or right? Shall I make the painting blue or red? Shall I make the sculpture small or large? Who cares? I'm free when I'm liberated from being caught up in such matters. Then I have the time and space and energy to take care of things, by which I literally mean to care for things. This is the premise from which I wish to act.



Voluntary Weathering - Helen Mirra. Installation shot.

**As your practice circles around the outdoors, I am interested in the relationship between the origin of your work and showing it in a gallery space. Especially since your works possess a certain humbleness. The works demand attention from the public simply by their presence. I find the friction that emerges out of these seemingly contradictory aspects; the outdoors versus indoors and the humbleness versus the exhibiting process, interesting.**

The outdoors and indoors rely on each other, as do formal and informal spaces, and "works" and "not-works". The outdoors and the gallery space are in relation to each other.

I don't think the works demand attention simply by their presence. They can be attended to, or they can be ignored. Somebody who is shouting demands attention, and it is difficult to ignore them, especially if they are nearby. Somebody who is speaking at a normal volume, you can either listen to them, or not. This is my interest anyway - to not-demand.

[1] Douglas Huebler created the hitch-hiking project in 1970. The project involved flipping a coin that would determine the direction of the artist ('south' or 'north'). He showed the documentation of going 'south' in Galleria Sperone in Turin and the documentation of going 'north' in Konrad Fischer, Turin. [Huebler, Douglas. Variable Works \(in Progress\), 1972.](#)

[2] André Cadere decided to take the train to the opening of *documenta 5* in Kassel but was expelled from the exhibition, in silent protest he spray-painted one of the exhibition buildings in his iconic sequence of colours, the same as on the wooden sticks, *barres de bois*, that he would take with him wherever. [Jolly, Matt. The Barred Colors of André Cadere.](#)

*Voluntary Weathering* opens September 9th in Andriess Eyck Galerie, Amsterdam

Zoë Dankert  
is webeditor at Metropolis M