

By Emmalea Russo

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“Not-knowing is most intimate”: Helen Mirra in Conversation with Emmalea Russo

Helen Mirra's work grounds itself in weaving and walking. The walks and the work are interdependent. In her current exhibition at Galerie Nordenhake (through September 26 in Stockholm), in one room, triangles line the walls, woven from the undyed wool of two black sheep, and in another, folded wool sculptures are on the floor. In the center room are text-image works made during intentional pauses along routes. The artist's hand is present in one of the photographs, holding a rock. The text accompanying the image:

“ONGOING DISTANT ROARS DOWN THROUGH FOREST ON FOOTPATH,

CLOSED CABIN, EDELWEISS IN LOG PLANTER, COLD SHADE”

The following conversation took place in playful and casual bursts over email between Brooklyn and Stockholm, mostly from August 18, 2015 through August 20, 2015.



Helen Mirra, Walking comma, 02 October, Cortina, 2013. Black and white photograph and text, framed, 28 x 43 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake.

EMMALEA RUSSO: Your work makes me think about the importance of place. Where are you now? What's it like there?

HELEN MIRRA: I'm in Sweden, though only for 10 days. The August light is friendly — clear and soft, and in Tyresta National Park, lake-swimming is bright, cool, and blueberries and mushrooms are rampant.

Much of your work is process-based and comes out of walking and/or being outside — a “paced printmaking” as you’ve called it. How did this shift to the outside happen?

For seemingly a long while I had been making work about the idea of the outside, without spending much time there. A series of opportunities shifted me out, maybe starting with a year I had a residency in Berlin, with a studio in the forest on the edge of the city. It crystallized during another residency year in Basel, when I was given an office rather than a studio to work in — a problem I resolved by deciding to spend the time mostly walking in the mountains, collecting rocks. That being a total pleasure; I knew I wanted to stay outside, and found a strategy for how to do that. There were a few years when the works were all a kind of printmaking. Then it drifted into other forms.

How has the work changed — how are the objects different — making work about the idea of the outside versus being actually outside while making/collecting?



Helen Mirra, Waulked Triangle, 2015. Undyed wool from two black sheep, strand of wool dyed with cortinarius semisanguineus, cork, cedar, 100 x 111 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake.

Only at first it was collecting — or, better, borrowing, as I returned most of the rocks to the mountains a few years after I had taken them. When walking became central, in its moving-center kind of way, I became less attached to the so-called work, and these days it feels more like it makes itself, and I assist.

I read an interview where you described yourself as a “careful amateur.” I think of this term often and I like the vastness of it, especially in a time so concerned with specialization and expertise. How does being a careful amateur fit your work and life? What are the benefits and drawbacks?

That’s funny: I think now I’d more say a brazen amateur, trying to be less cautious. Eihei Dogen noted that “not-knowing is most intimate.” So much more is available when one is not focused-on, not buttoned-up. So-called mistakes are constant, and no cause for distress; the aim is simply for one’s mistakes to be harmless. Once one is really mostly practicing being a beginner, everything is easier — frustrations still come up but are briefer in duration and easier to set aside, or to flip into curiosity, and approach.

How is a walk in the city different from a walk in the country? Do you have a preference?

It has taken me a while to embrace walking in the city, and it was practicing half-smiling, as described by Thich Nhat Hanh, that has allowed me to. Cities have the disadvantage of concrete and cars, and the advantage of discernible responses to practicing half-smiling. Forests are still the easiest for me: the changing surfaces underfoot, the moving light, the multitude of sounds high and low, near and far, the palpable diversity of species, the distinctions between a wet and a dry forest, in smell and color and the feeling of the air. Mountains are the most eccentric, and object-related.



Helen Mirra, Folded waulked triangle, 2015. Undyed wool from two black sheep, strand of wool dyed with boletopsis sp., 46 x 50 x 4 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake.

Where and how do you prefer to spend your time?

I mostly try to drop preferences about where I am, and just be where I am. Still, I do feel most in my element when walking, especially in unmanaged green space, without any need to get anywhere particular, and while standing weaving, alternating balancing on one foot and the other. There are substantial pleasures of being somewhere I altogether or mostly can’t understand the language. This is an obvious kind of not-knowing, when there is nothing to do but pay attention to small gestures and expressions. I’m content in a hammock, particularly the one in our backyard next to where we buried our longtime cat-friend, Maclow.

You have a book called *Edge Habitat Materials* (2014). I think of walking as an edge practice. How do you think of edges? Who are the artists/people/thinkers who engage edge-space in ways that inform your work, or feel compelling?

I think of the edge being where one thing turns into another, turns inside out, upside down, where synesthesia happens — what happens in translation or communication, looking for and not finding the exactly right word. Of course a classic edge is the one between the familiar and unfamiliar. I think the edge habitat is the territory of André Cadere and Ad Reinhardt, both keystone artists for me. Percussionist Robyn Schulkowsky. Translation work of Basho by Kazuaki Tanahashi and of Chinese Buddhist writings by Bill Porter (*The Mountain Poems of Stonehouse*, 2014), Ruth Ozeki’s novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013). Forgetting is a great edge.



Helen Mirra, Walking commas, 27 June, Cape Breton, 2014. Black and white photographs and text in seven framed parts, 7 parts, each 43 x 28 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake.

You have a solo exhibition that opened August 20th in Stockholm. Could you talk a little about the work in the show and the process of making it?

I’ve been weaving on a large triangle loom, with the hypotenuse set at 180, 215, or 240 cm. Each weaving has wool from two black sheep — changing from one to the other halfway through. Three blacks appear: two from the individual sheep, one of their admixture. These three blacks are barely differentiated one from another but for a delimiting colored strand, dyed from foraged mushrooms, drawn through each work. Each inexact triangle is doubled over a cedar support, or folded into an even smaller floor sculpture.

In the fall, I saw your show in New York at Peter Freeman and found myself getting very close to those woven triangles, noticing the different strands of color. Those invited very close looking. I feel this way about much of your work. For example the *Quarry* works (2007) — small sculptures made with folded pieces of clothing, each with a rock perched on top. I find that these and the triangles ask for a certain kind of hovering and closeness —

certainly evoking Dogen's "not-knowing is most intimate." Can you say more about the connection between not-knowing and your practice? Zen teachings and your practice?



Installation view, "Helen Mirra" at Galerie Nordenhake, 2015.

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake.

Hovering is a good word — the aerial equivalent of tender-footed curiosity — which is one of the ways I think of not-knowing. Like the outdoors and walking going from the theoretical to the actual, it has been the same for me with so-called secular Buddhist philosophy — while I was intellectually engaged with it when I was younger, now I'd say I'm an adherent.

The "aerial equivalent of tender-footed curiosity" is lovely. It makes me wonder about the ways you're encountering the outside — the "unmanaged green space" — and how that might relate to the ways in which viewers encounter your work in a gallery.

It's like walking all day in rain and then coming inside and changing into dry clothes, or sleeping and awake, or vice versa. A gallery is a temporary minimalist habitat, and sort of like an animal shelter. I'm largely in agreement with Rémy Zaugg's charge for ideal exhibition spaces (his 1986 lecture was recently translated and published: *The Art Museum of My Dreams, or, A Place for the Work and the Human Being*) and it is a reminder of why, how, they can be worthwhile. Maybe an examined life is best led outdoors, constantly reminded of its interdependence, and the exhibition space is a useful temporary fiction of autonomy for artworks, for another kind of attending to.

What's next?

Referential weaving experiments, for a pair of shows in Berlin in January with Allyson Strafella. In one space we will show works of ours from 15 to 20 years ago, that we think of as connecting from there to where we are now. In the other, we will show new works, which we consider as reiterations or paraphrases, replies or responses, to each other's particular existing works (which might or might not be included in the early-work show). Allyson is making typewriter drawings, and I'm making tapestry weavings. We both have very particular limitations, in color for instance, because of the materials we are using (typewriter ink, carbon paper/un-dyed and plant- or mushroom-dyed yarns), and size by the respective widths of typewriter platens and loom warps.



Installation view, "Helen Mirra" at Galerie Nordenhake, 2015.

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake.