

-----DRAFT-----6/11/2016, 7/2/2016

**Notes from conversation with Karen Reimer, 6/10/16 at Yusho, in Hyde Park.**

*Notes:*

*--She said she would live by the flip --*

*--I could have sworn we talked about the pieced fabric as a veil between worlds.*

To walk into the lower level of Karen Reimer's installation at the Hyde Park Art Center at first may feel like an immersion in material history. The write-up for the show provided by the center emphasizes the history of place, anchoring the installation in the artifacts shown in a glass exhibition case: some reclaimed bricks of the hotel perching on the formerly closer, and before that, formerly submerged shoreline excavated at the site the Hyde Park Art Center now occupies, plus the local, sawyered trees used to construct a representation of then-boardwalks. Some tree slices show rings of time in biological system form.

In this experience of the installation, the walker walks the boardwalk by tons of sand laboriously reenacting the beach that was right there, and looks up to see a sky-like pieced fabric: hand-dyed whites and blues, circles and oblongs, but not quite matched up, as organic as nature. To walk starting from the ground floor offers an immersion in one kind of ground floor understanding of local history: the real thing, the placeness of place, groundedness, the ground floor of interpretation.

**FLIP**

Then to walk upstairs and look down from above shows the other side of the pieced fabric, the stitched side with seams, a view of the pieced fabric that "flips," in Reimer's word, evoking the water surface of Lake Michigan. The reference is not nearly so specific to place, Reimer suggested in conversation, but rather a 2-D stylized representation developed from the genre of domestic arts about nature from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, calling attention to its 2-D form (seams, stitching, wavelike patterns). The gigantism of scale and labor (a good six months of sewing) calls attention to constructedness, genre as a room built by labor.

To put the pieced fabric together with the traces of history, and read the reference book in the glass case that includes some of the excavated bricks of history, leads to a variety of cognitive

flips: from below, the entrant into the immersive installation walks into what was formerly submerged, and looks up to see either sky or what a swimmer would see from underwater, the waterline above, lights shining through, multiple circles of light, decentered in a shifting fluid history.

To walk into into the history of Lake Michigan communities, Reimer's installation suggests, is to recognize boundaries of perceived solid spaces as stylized objects, produced by domestic labor, like pieced fabric reshaping an interior space. This immersive art installation immerses the body in a built space that shows how nature/culture, water/land, inside/outside and history/present are pieced like quilts, using domestic labor, inside and outside. Their histories are not simple histories, not only objects.

The reference book\* placed under glass, opened to the specific page of reference, says that the Hyde Park Art Center was built where once the Chicago Beach Hotel was built, on invented land. The land really was actually invented, dredged up, the history says -- just sand from Lake Michigan, and then the sand dredger said the sand was land and the land belonged to him and he sold it and/or built a hotel on it. The reference book as the authority of material history in this installation calls attention to a perfect example of the built construction of reality, whereby social fictions become concrete and lived as if they were always true. (\*Susan O'Connor Davis and John Vinci, *Chicago's Historic Hyde Park*, University of Chicago Press, 2013.)

## **FLIP**

Reimer's installations tend to challenge modernist and enlightenment ideals of objective reason, putting the systems of reason into process and playing them out to show that at some point, when pushed, an absurdity or a decentering occurs (see the terrific "Endless, Interview" with editor Lorelei Stewart in the Reimer monograph *Endless* [Gallery 400 University of Illinois at Chicago and Whitewalls, 2013]). That point then becomes a kind of center in her work. This installation keeps offering multiple centers, and then decenters them. The material history isn't only a solidity, although it is real, it is also a construction, an invention.

Community spaces, like the rolled-up garage door with café tables for lattes and summer conversation by the art center, suggest that immersion in community, like immersion in nature, involves inhabiting a built space, laboriously pieced together like a quilt stitched over time, without a consistent or controlling pattern. The interior space of the gallery offers a built construction of our exterior experiences as always subjective, always being rearranged by the mind and culture of its time.

Instead of seeing the pieced fabric as sky from below, I tend to see it as the water surface from under. I like the submersion metaphor as a metaphor of diving into history, movement down in

time and inquiry, a diving into the wreck of history (as in Adrienne Rich's 1973 poem "Diving into the Wreck.")

## **FLIP**

Viewed from below, the waterline above us also evokes the catastrophic rising water line of climate change--the coming wave, when the formerly submerged will be submerged again.

## **FLIP**

Reimer, in conversation, emphasized that it was interesting to work on a fabric piece so large that there was no way to see it in perspective while sewing. To work on it was to be inside it. So the pieced fabric, shaped arbitrarily by the space it occupies more than an individual maker's controlling intent, evokes another cognitive flip: the pieced fabric works also as a kind of signifier of a process problem, not so much a surface as a betweenness, a relational tissue, a veil between making and being in context, worldviews and worlds.

Thus the pieced fabric with light above and constructed reality below functions as a kind of veil between public/private worlds, and all the signifiers evoked by the way that binary opposition plays out in contextualized city spaces – race, class, access, community ideas all colliding. Sheets as veils between worlds and the public/private controversies over the lake still signify divisions demarcating worlds, indexing inequality of race, income, and access as signified by the polyvalence of "public".

To locate art in the space of an important problem, or to position a community art center itself as a site of a contested public issue is a particularly important contribution of this artist's work. The space evoking the pieced history of a public/private trust is where the great social forces of a city building itself intersect so dramatically with the great natural forces of the great lakes.

The public/private problem continues to be a contested space in Chicago in terms of capitalist economics. Is a community art center like the Hyde Park Art Center, a nonprofit enterprise, more legitimately positioned in the public trust, than a presumably for-profit museum belonging to a particular director from one art industry as in the current case of the Lucas Museum?

Much of Hyde Park, it turns out, was formerly submerged, and any land developed out of formerly submerged space still lives in a public space in some sense. Reimer's project submerses the participant in feeling underwater, back in the lake, while living on top of what was once underwater.

*Ami Regier*