

STRANGE



ATTRACTOR

March 10–August 6, 2017
Curated by Gryphon Rue

Featuring Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Thomas Ashcraft,
Robert Buck, Alexander Calder, Lucky Dragons,
Beatrice Gibson, Phillipa Horan, Channa Horwitz,
Haroon Mirza, Douglas Ross

Cover image

Photo by Thomas Ashcraft, *Dancing sprites over
southeast Colorado, August 04, 2013*

Strange Attractor explores the uncertainties and poetics of networks, environmental events, technology, and sound. The term “strange attractor” describes the inherent order embedded in chaos, perceivable in harmonious yet unpredictable patterns. Essential to these subjects are intimate, vast, and interconnected abstractions we must reconcile with our lived experience—the problem of how to clearly perceive and interpret the world.

My abstract folly hurries me away while I am at work, carrying me over mountains and valleys, which are not real, into a land of abstraction... I, with my whole might, chain my feet to the world of duty and reality. But in vain! The faster I bind, the better is the ballast; for I, so far from being bound down, take the world with me in my flights, and often it seems lighter than a ball of wool rolled by the wind.

—William Blake to Thomas Butts, September 11, 1801

Sound pervades the exhibition, literally or latently, through production or allusion. Here is a moment of metaphysical vertigo. Here are synergistic emblems, resonating off each other. Here are leitmotifs of capital, transmigration, and asylum.

Early on, I denied a traditional curator’s approach of selecting objects that would promote and conform to a unifying thesis. Instead, I shadowed non-linear reasoning and the peculiar fixations of an intuitive process. As a musician, I found correspondences to the warp and woof of album production. I often returned to the concept of *disparity*, which guides my thinking in everyday life. It has been my immense pleasure to facilitate conversations between disparate artworks — they speak in many tongues.

You will find in my works the movement of masses, varying in radiance, and of different densities and volumes. When these masses come into collision, the phenomena of penetration or repulsion will result. Certain transmutations taking place on one plane, by projecting themselves on other planes which move at different speeds and are placed at different angles, should create the impression of prismatic aural (auditory) deformations.

—Edgard Varèse, 1936

Strange Attractor is structured metonymically: discrepant pieces are organized to form chains of association. Frogs → petroleum → yachts. Arthur Russell had a poster of tropical fish on his bathroom wall with the caption, “In the gentle undersea rhythms of a coral reef, the Blue Tang displays his dreamy coloration.” Contiguous thinking is desirous. Slide, scan, swipe.

The vocabulary deployed for separating signal and noise is surprisingly pastoral: data “farming” and “harvesting,” “mining” and “extraction” are embraced as if we lived through another massive neolithic revolution with its own kind of magic formulas... The stones and ores of the past are replaced by silicone and rare earth minerals, while a Minecraft paradigm of extraction describes the processing of minerals into elements of information architecture.

—Hito Steyerl, “A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis) Recognition,” *e-flux Journal* 72, April 2016

The majority of works in *Strange Attractor* are making their public debut, including *Clangors* (1942), a never-previously-exhibited noise-mobile by my great-grandfather, Alexander Calder, as well as new commissions by Lucky Dragons and Phillipa Horan. *Strange Attractor* incubated in “Calder and Sound,” a manuscript I wrote about the artist’s noise-mobiles, his influence on post-WWII composers, and his musical legacy in the avant-classical use of “mobility,” “mobile composition,” and “open form.” Three years ago I proposed to Ballroom Marfa a colloquium and exhibition intermingling Chaos theory and improvisational music, but as things developed, I whisked these ideas into a thick multidisciplinary soup. Tracks and traces of these ingredients remain. “Calder and Sound” and the “Strange Attractor Reader” — extracts and source material — are available on-site.

Fernand Léger called Calder a realist, an epithet Calder agreed with, adding: “If you can imagine a thing, conjure it up in space — then you can make it, and *tout de suite* you’re a realist.” This could be a strategy to confront contemporary problems: we receive impressions of myriad local and global phenomena, absorbing the new(s) in our bodies and psyches, yet the power of our imagination can capture the realism embedded in these insidious abstractions — and their material consequences.

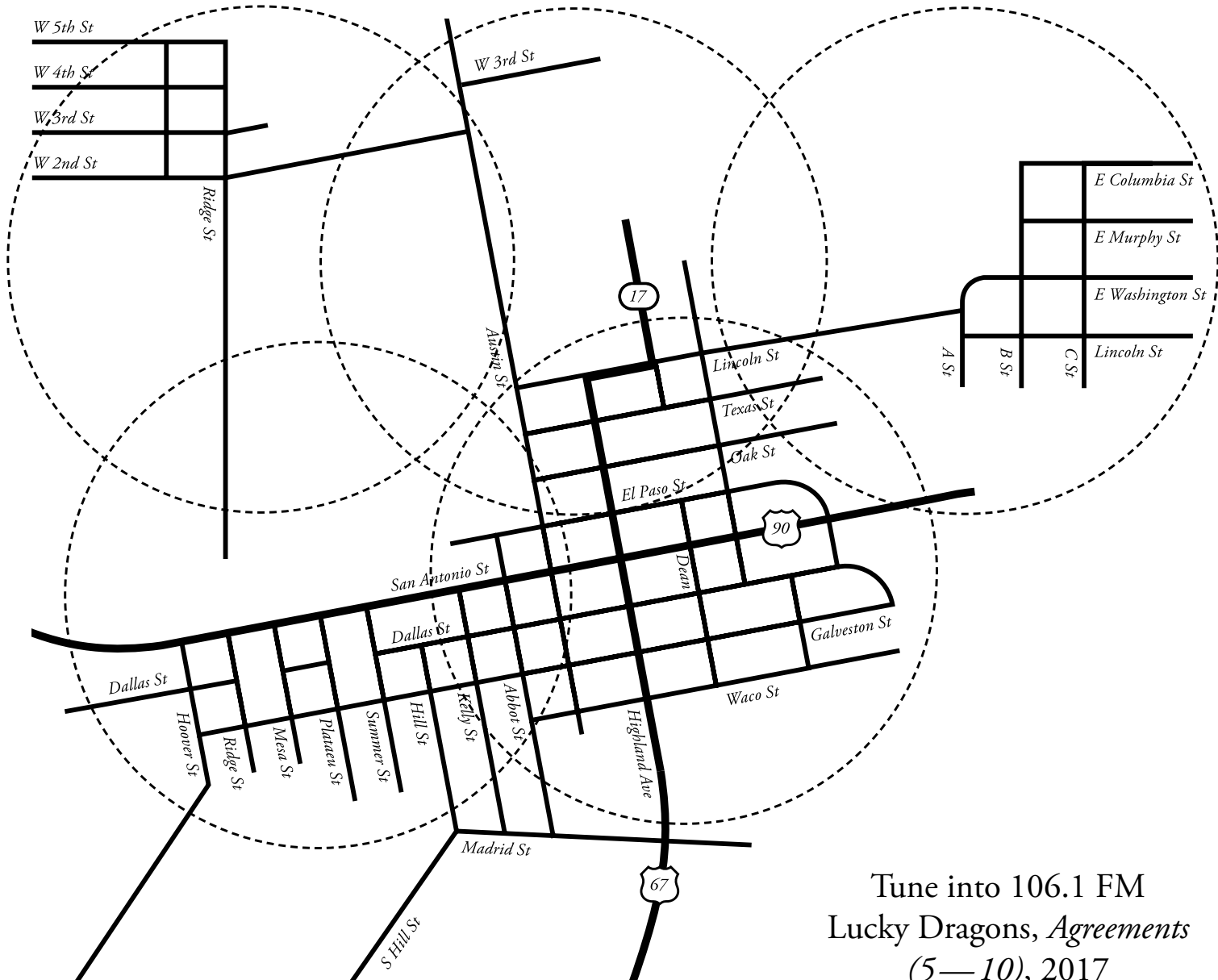
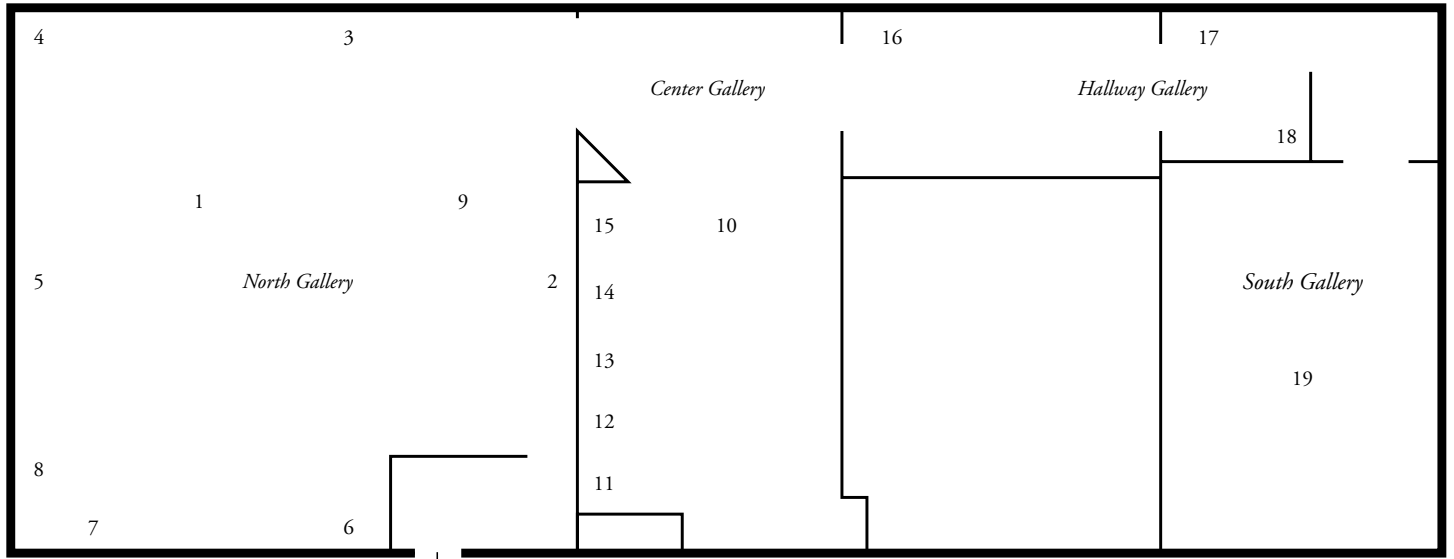
The dream of the cloud was complete meltdown, such that everything became liquid to be pumped here, injected there, siphoned from me, and redirected to you... it meant cultivating a pirate mycelium capable of migrating across platforms: visual media, social media, and any media that might succeed them. In the material world the constant was entropy; here, the constant was metamorphosis. The message was similar regardless of whether you were talking about advertising or finance or art or digital networks.

—Seth Price, *Fuck Seth Price: A Novel*, 2015

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all those who have contributed to the making of *Strange Attractor*. I am most grateful to Ballroom’s founders, Fairfax Dorn and Virginia Lebermann. I would also like to thank Susan Sutton, Laura Copelin, Sarah Melendez, Nicki Ittner, Daniel Chamberlain, Peyton Gardner, Gabriela Caraballo, Matt Grant, and Youssef Hani, who worked tirelessly to support my vision.

—Gryphon Rue

- | | <i>North Gallery</i> | | <i>Center Gallery</i> | | <i>Hallway gallery</i> |
|----|--|----|---|----|--|
| 1 | Douglas Ross (b. 1969, in Brockton, MA, lives and works in New York, NY)
<i>abstraxi</i> , 2014
Jacquard-woven tapestry, steel
Variable dimensions (6 ½ × 48 feet, end to end)
Alexander S. C. Rower, New York | 10 | Alexander Calder (1898–1976, lived and worked in Roxbury, CT)
<i>Clangors</i> , 1942
Sheet metal, rod, string, and paint
26 ½ × 51 inches
Calder Foundation, New York | 16 | Thomas Ashcraft
<i>Jellyfish Sprites over west Texas, date unknown</i>
Color near-infrared photograph
15 × 18 inches
All works courtesy the artist |
| 2 | Channa Horwitz (1932–2013, lived and worked in Los Angeles, CA)
<i>8th Level Discovered</i> , 1982
Ink and colored pencil on graph mylar
17 × 22 inches
Collection of Ellen Davis | 11 | Thomas Ashcraft
<i>Dancing Sprites over southeastern Colorado, August 04, 2013</i>
Color near-infrared photograph
15 × 18 inches
All works courtesy the artist | 17 | <i>Jellyfish Sprite over western Kansas, June 16, 2013</i> |
| 3 | <i>Sonakinatography I Composition XXII</i> , 1991
Casein on graph mylar
21 ½ × 21 ½ inches
Collection of Alex Sainsbury | 12 | <i>Sprite Cluster over west Texas, June 09, 2014</i> | 18 | Robert Buck (b. 1959, Towson, MD, lives and works in New York, NY and Far West Texas)
<i>"At the end of the day..." (Holding area, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Nogales Placement Center, Nogales, AZ, June 18, 2014)</i>
Giclee print and synthetic polymer on canvas
85 ½ × 54 × 1 ½ inches |
| 4 | Lawrence Abu Hamdan (b. 1985, Amman, Jordan, lives and works in Beirut, Lebanon)
<i>Conflicted Phonemes</i> , 2012
Vinyl wall print, 9 A4 sized vinyl prints, and 9 stacks of printed A4 paper
Courtesy the artist and Mor Charpentier | 13 | <i>Giant Jellyfish Sprite over west Texas, June 23, 2014</i> | | <i>South Gallery</i> |
| 5 | Thomas Ashcraft (b. 1951, Springfield, Illinois, lives and works in North central New Mexico)
<i>Coins to be Traded for Shining Cake</i> , 2017
Mixed media
All works courtesy the artist | 14 | <i>Elementary Jellyfish Sprite over eastern New Mexico, May 07, 2012</i> | 19 | Beatrice Gibson (b. 1978, London, UK, lives and works in London)
<i>F for Fibonacci</i> , 2014
16 mm and 35 mm transferred to HD, surround sound
Duration 16:20 minutes
Courtesy the artist; Laura Bartlett Gallery, London; LUX, London |
| 6 | <i>Red Sprite over Taos, New Mexico, August 06, 2012</i>
Color near-infrared photograph
15 × 18 inches | 15 | <i>Giant Jellyfish Sprite over west Texas, June 14, 2016</i> | | |
| 7 | Haroon Mirza (b. 1977, London, UK, lives and works in London)
<i>Supernova</i> , 2016
Lophophora williamsii electroetching on copper PCB blank
15 ¼ × 19 ¼ inches
Works courtesy hrm199, Lisson Gallery | | | | |
| 8 | <i>Cosmos</i> , 2016 | | | | |
| 10 | Phillipa Horan (Lives and works in London, UK)
<i>Foreign Exchange</i> , 2015–17
Mycelium-grown sculpture, steel boat, soldier harvester ants, NASA designed ant gel, acrylic oar, Arduino and LED matrix
Variable dimensions
Commissioned by Ballroom Marfa
Courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa | | | | |
| | | | <i>Courtyard</i> | | |
| 20 | Lucky Dragons (Sarah Rara b. Livingston, NJ, 1983; Luke Fischbeck b. San Francisco, CA, 1978; both live and work in Los Angeles, CA)
<i>Agreements 5–10</i> , 2017
Stainless steel, concrete, radio transmitters
Variable dimensions
Commissioned by Ballroom Marfa
Courtesy the artists and Ballroom Marfa | | | | |



Tune into 106.1 FM
Lucky Dragons, *Agreements*
(5—10), 2017

Lawrence Abu Hamdan

Known for his forensic audio investigations and advocacy work, Lawrence Abu Hamdan reflects upon the hybrid nature of accents in *Conflicted Phonemes* (2012) and the controversial use of language analysis to determine the origin of asylum seekers. Abu Hamdan's map-based work offers the asylum seeker an alternative and non-vocal mode of contestation.

Thomas Ashcraft

Coins to be Traded for Shining Cake (2017)

Different worlds have different monies and it is advantageous to have something to trade in whatever world we find ourselves.

—Thomas Ashcraft

Thomas Ashcraft is a naturalist, artisan, extrapolator, and currency designer with a dual residency in northern New Mexico and Heliotown. For *Strange Attractor*, Ashcraft shares some of his working and writing kit and a selection of recent coins from his shop and bundle. He also shares his stimulation.

As an extrapolator, Ashcraft practices anticipatory design science in the Buckminster Fuller sense. He looks to nature and asks what society needs that doesn't exist now. How do we bring it into existence?

He foresees a developing new political state, the Biological Commonwealth, and ponders its possible economics. And he visions the future commodities of the new Commonwealth and potential new mediums of exchange.

As a currency designer, Ashcraft wipes the old money symbols of kings, queens, thieves, and generals and casts anew. He sculpts microbes, conjugating bacteria, jellyfish, pollen, eggs, phages, and something he calls the ubiquitous "schmoo."

He notes: "Yes there is cake, and indeed even now there is cake for all, but shall we amplify it and move toward what the soul craves which is *shining cake*?"

Through his work, Ashcraft provides passage to Heliotown and gives a glimpse of shining cake.

Transient Luminous Events in the Mesosphere (2012–17)

It turns out that the mesosphere above us is full of exotic phenomena, like these lightning generated transient luminous events in the form of sprites on the wall here. Mind-blowingly, sprites were only first imaged by chance in 1989 and confirmed from the space shuttle in 1991. They had been glimpsed prior to this with the naked eye but the sightings and reports were doubted by scientists. Yet here they are.

Sprites are large-scale electrical discharges that occur high above a thunderstorm cloud giving rise to a varied range of intricate shapes. They are triggered by lightning strokes between the storm cloud and the ground. They often occur in clusters, occurring roughly thirty to sixty miles above the Earth's surface.

They come in various forms and no two are alike. Whereas science can explain some aspects of their physicality it cannot fully explain their shapes. They can be jellyfish-like, carrot-like, angel-winged, wish-boned, columniform and they are all huge in the sky. Some are five times bigger than Mount Everest!

Here are some sprites captured over the past few years from my observatory in northern New Mexico using a modified camera that is sensitive to the near infrared part of the spectrum.

I invite you to see my videos of sprites in motion at the website below to get more intimate detail. I made the scientific innovation of video capturing optical sprites with their dynamic radio emissions.

Thomas Ashcraft

Observatory of Heliotown

www.heliotown.com

Robert Buck

Bisecting the repeating pattern of sand-colored images in *“At the end of the day...”* (*Holding area, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Nogales Placement Center, Nogales, AZ, June 18, 2014*) is a large contrasting snakeskin print. The canvas insinuates questions about the nature of beauty and globalization—of civilization and its current discontents—by evoking luxury goods, fashion, and décor.

The question was how to handle the death drive, the compulsion to repeat, as it operates today in hypermodernity. The *“At the end of the day...”* series of paintings formally relies on the grid and its contemporary associations, such as Photoshop and GPS satellites, in order to disrupt it. The paintings rekindle recent headline-news events: inexplicable, yet no longer uncommon, random acts of violence or maleficence. A single image of what happened, or its aftermath—in this case immigrant children detained at a border patrol station in Arizona—salvaged from scores of images available on the internet, is cropped, inverted, multiplied, and digitally printed on canvas. Disrupting the digitally generated mosaic is a silkscreened image of an organically occurring pattern in nature, one with a subliminal link to the event. At first glance, the image-event lattice is likely to be misperceived as wallpaper, fabric, or décor. But think again, and the cascade of recurring images doesn’t confront the troubling event itself, but rather creates a screen, a defense, against it. Given this incessant backdrop, it’s not easy to know what’s “natural” and what’s not.

Alexander Calder

How can art be realized?

Out of volumes, motion, spaces bounded by the great space, the universe.

Out of different masses, light, heavy, middling—indicated by variations of size or color—directional lines—vectors which represent speeds, velocities, accelerations, forces, etc. . . .—these directions making between them meaningful angles, and senses, together defining one big conclusion or many.

Spaces, volumes, suggested by the smallest means in contrast to their mass, or even including them, juxtaposed, pierced by vectors, crossed by speeds.

Nothing at all of this is fixed.

Each element able to move, to stir, to oscillate, to come and go in its relationships with the other elements in its universe.

It must not be just a “fleeting” moment, but a physical bond between the varying events in life.

Not extractions,

But abstractions

Abstractions that are like nothing in life except in their manner of reacting.

—Alexander Calder, 1932

Strange Attractor marks the public debut of *Clangors* (1942). In the process of making this noise-mobile, Calder pierced holes through the near-center of several of its elements, later deciding against the idea of suspending the elements through these holes, a technique he employed in his noise-mobile *Boomerangs* (1941). The rods in *Clangors* are repurposed from a former sculpture—two of them were previously a single rod that Calder intentionally snapped apart, and black paint marks near the ends of the rods are related to a prior use. *Clangors* is a sister work to *The Clangor* (1941), which Calder described as “three heavy plates that gave off quite a clangor.” Underlining the importance that the principle *disparity* plays in a composition, Calder added, “Here was just another variation. You see, you have weight, form, size, color, motion and then you have noise.”

Lucky Dragons

Agreements (5—10) (2017) consists of two objects (cast steel tuning forks) and six radio transmissions. Two of the radio transmissions originate with antennas in the courtyard of Ballroom Marfa, and the other four are distributed at various locations around Marfa, TX.

The transmissions, overlapping geographically and all broadcasting on the same frequency (106.1 fm), compete with one another to reach the listener who chooses to tune in. This competing interference manifests as pockets of clarity, separated by boundaries of noise and silence. Listening while moving, one can hear these borders as they are crossed, and the shift between territories can be heard as dominance rotating from one signal to another.

No two signals can hold the territory. It is a function of FM radio receivers to capture only those signals that rise above a power threshold, and to discard those signals that fall below. This filtering is useful as a means of identifying the dominant source in densely populated areas, where it is common for multiple transmissions to occupy the same bandwidth. In the rare boundary areas where each signal carries equal power, a receiver will oscillate randomly between signals.

The tuning forks, one double-sided and the other four-sided, resonate with two and four narrowly separated pitches, respectively. Each of these reference pitches corresponds directly to one of the six radio transmissions, serving as the basis for the musical universe contained in that signal. Cast as single objects that hold multiple reference pitches, the forks present the limits of sensing the whole of a group. Listening to each individual part in turn, you must hold the sound of one ringing note in your memory in order to compare it to another sound, just as your sense of each radio signal is interrupted as your position changes, and the relative power of all signals shift.

Beatrice Gibson

F For Fibonacci (2014) is a film that takes as its departure point American author William Gaddis' epic modernist novel *J R* (1975). An eerily prescient, biting social satire, *J R* tells the story of a precocious eleven-year-old capitalist who, with the unwitting help of his school's resident composer, inadvertently creates the single greatest virtual empire the world has seen, spun largely from the anonymity of the school's pay phone.

F For Fibonacci develops a particular episode from *J R*, in which a televised music lesson is scrambled with a math class on derivatives inside the mind of its child protagonist. Musings on aleatory music become muddled with virtual stock pickings and a theory of "market noise." Unfolding through the modular machine aesthetics of the video game *Minecraft* are text book geometries, graphic scores, images from physics experiments, and cartoon dreams, blended with images from wall street: stock market crashes, trading pits, algorithms, and transparent glass.

As well as the writing of Gaddis, the film draws on the work of little-known British experimental educator and composer John Paynter, who infamously took Cornelius Cardew, John Cage, and Karlheinz Stockhausen into primary schools, and who, along with better known figures such as art critic Herbert Read, was at the forefront of utopian postwar pedagogical movements orientated around child-centered education. Following Paynter's lead, Gibson worked closely with eleven-year-old Clay Barnard Chodzko on a number of the film's production elements, commissioning him to design an office in *Minecraft* and develop an existing character of his own invention, Mr. Money. Gibson and Chodzko's ramblings on the subject of his protagonist lead the viewer through *F For Fibonacci's* hallucinatory soup.

Mirroring *J R's* preoccupation with indeterminacy and abstraction, *F For Fibonacci* inverts the utopian and dystopian dimensions of abstraction: the avant-garde desires of Cage, Stockhausen, and Paynter meet the entropic dimensions of dematerialized financial systems. If abstraction ultimately supposes authorial withdrawal, the ceding of control of production to the laws of chance is, of course, a gamble. But it's not just the buccaneering financiers of deregulated markets that know how to roll dice. Gibson's practice is also predicated on the idea of creating open-ended compositional structures, landscapes in which an asynchronous assembly of elements—actors, objects, and images—are placed together and left to dance. The aleatory nature of this way of working affords *F For Fibonacci* its recursivity; the content and construction of the film follow the same methodology.

Phillipa Horan

Foreign Exchange (2015–17) came into fruition (literally) from an interest in democratic networks and systems with an absent central point of power. Similar to the structure of the human brain, mycelium is like certain threads of the Internet and other organisms' webbed biospheres, such as a honeybee hive and an ant colony. We can learn a lot from nature's shared wisdom and collective decision-making.

Charon, the central figure portrayed, is the ancient Greek ferryman who carries the dead across the river Styx for a fee. I was interested in the poetry of the mycelium roots narrating a route from life to death. In the installation, Charon's transparent oar contains a live ant farm; an ant-art that is creating a network; a drawing of ant tunnels made, as the ants eat and burrow in the colored NASA-designed gel that they can live in for their three- to six-month lifecycle. This element is reminiscent of *March* (2010), a piece I exhibited at the old AIG building in New York (2011), consisting of canvases encasing live ant colonies.

The installation began in my studio in 2015 in London as a clay modeled ferryman, an almost Pygmalion figure based loosely on various males in my life. The figure was cast in Jesmonite sections, which were then taken to the Ecovative bio materials plant and research lab in Green Island, NY. The developers and engineers working there are world-leading experts in developing uses for mycelium and have turned it into a commercial commodity, producing packaging, bricks, and insulation. I kind of invented an artist-in-residency there and worked closely with the brilliant engineer and architect Kenneth Lush. I used the lab's huge nano-digitalised humidity chambers to speed up the growing process and guarantee the precision of the density and surface that I sought, which looks like a carved white stone, though feels like a velvety horse's nose. The sculptures are "grown to be shown," never stored, and once exhibited should be put outside and left to decompose, a process that could take a year or two depending on the climate. If left inside, they can last for thirty to forty years, or be regrown to be displayed again. The figurative sculpture has literally been grown, and at certain points was alive and unpredictable, before it was dehydrated in heat chambers, killed, and essentially stabilized. The mycelium material itself is literally functioning as the democratic system it narrates.

Channa Horwitz

The key to my work is simplicity and complexity. I have been working with the premise that any complexity can be understood in its simplest form; that all diverse fields are in some way similar. In my notations I am interested in breaking through the barrier of the different arts, because they all have a common language. The language I use in my notations is applicable to some aspect of each of the arts. In these notations I am searching for some connecting link to establish a clearer reality

—Channa Horwitz, 1974

In 1968, Channa Horwitz began using the term "Sonakinatography," denoting sound, motion, and notation, to describe a mathematically based graphic exploration of the fourth dimension, which could also be realized through a variety of artistic and technological disciplines. Each Sonakinatography drawing is composed from a linear logical play of sequences where graph describes time and space, and color, number, or symbol plot motion, light, or sound. **Sonakinatography I Composition XXII** (1991) is the outcome of one of these rule-based mathematical sequences. Horwitz produced twenty four Sonakinatography compositions and their variations that span from the late 1960s to 2012. Each Sonakinatography drawing is a standalone artwork, which could also be schema for unique realizations in other media. There have been interpretations of these compositions (mostly *Composition III*) by other artists, performed using mediums of music, dance and light, animation, and sound and light installations. She created a flip book from *Composition V*, and a "poem opera" for eight voices from *Composition III* called "The Divided Person."

Channa Horwitz' **8th Level Discovered** (1982) is a working drawing from her Canon series. Horwitz did the bulk of this body of work from 1980–82 and continued creating new compositions in between each new investigation and series throughout the rest of her life. Each one of her bodies of work grew out of an investigation of the last, where she would ask, "What would happen if I ...?" and would not know in advance, until she played out the rules and linear logic within that structure. The Canon series evolved from her Slices series, which was in turn the result of reducing *Sonakinatography Expanded* to its essence. The eight sequential shapes that come from *Slices, Front to Back* were layered over each other, creating the very dense structure of the Canons.

Haroon Mirza

Making their debut in *Strange Attractor*, **Cosmos** (2016) and **Supernova** (2016) were made through a process of placing live peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) on blank PCBs (material usually used to make circuit boards) and running electrical current through them. The alkaloid rich juices of the plant oxidized on the copper, leaving an etched print.

During a site visit to Marfa, Mirza became interested in the cult of peyote, a plant native to the local area, specifically on the banks of the Rio Grande, the Chihuahuan Desert, and the Big Bend National Park area. The cacti's recorded use dates back almost 6,000 years among the indigenous peoples of the area. Peyote and other entheogens' meditative, medical, and spiritual effects have in recent years been held responsible for the esoteric knowledge of ancient civilizations such as the Aztecs and Mayans. Graphically the prints resemble cosmological clusters not too dissimilar to the kind of visions these plants produce in humans, if consumed.

Douglas Ross

The many images transmitted to us by our Mars rovers show, among other things, tread patterns from the probe's wheels winding across that planet's sandy regolith. They show that we are the aliens.

The Latin word *abstraxi* is the perfect active tense of *abstrahō*, meaning, *I draw away from, drag or pull away (from a source or origin); I withdraw, alienate from; (and figuratively) I divert, draw away*. This is the origin of the Dutch *abstraheren*—to abstract; to think abstractly; to create abstractions.

Translating an array of images that capture a territory into layers of woven yarn means stitching together and condensing only essential information, and assigning appropriate physical structures to that information. Those minute structures manifest color and texture. In **abstraxi** (2014), the structures intermingle to picture a place in the light of day—innumerable yarns as innumerable bits of terrestrial matter, and its reverse side some incidental gaseous state. In order to weave place and time in this way, the image has to be utterly specific, and yet the specific *where* of what's depicted through *abstraxi* isn't primary for me. It is any-place like this sort of place—a disrupted landscape. Initially, beginning with thinking and photographing the landscape, all of this is digital. (But weaving was digital before *digital* was digital.) Once it's woven, photographic realism can hardly catch up with the veridical presence of yarns becoming a new place and time. The sculpture as folding screen or folding screen as sculpture carries the consciousness that every exhibition space and exhibition scenario invokes the claiming and delineation of territory.

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BALLROOM MARFA

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