

In Constant Translation:

Artist Profile of Lynn Marie Kirby by Carolina Magis Weinberg

Interview: 03/24/2017, Split Café (2300 Polk St. SF)

Lynn Marie Kirby is intriguing: she exceeds categories. Just like her work, the longer one spends asking her questions, the denser and richer the understanding becomes.

I meet Lynn on a Friday at 6pm in Russian Hill. She arrives to our meeting dressed in one of her fabulously elegant attires. A black hat, a black furry scarf, and a gray sweater contrast perfectly with her coral necklace; the accent of color could go unnoticed, but waits there for those who appreciate details, something like a discrete footnote.

We pick a place next door to the Alhambra Theater, a café that is not quite a café, confusing and busy on a Friday evening. We both get tea and find a booth. The conversation starts immediately. Lynn and I have had a relationship of talking since she was my advisor at CCA. The exchange we are about to have feels quotidian, because of the many conversations we have had in the past. At the same time, this is not just any other conversation, but it in fact was the day where I met Lynn all over again.

So, dear reader, join me as I introduce to you the wondrous career of a fascinating artist. If you do not know her, let me introduce you to her, and if you do, let us discover her again together.

Lynn was born in DC, then she moved to Toronto, then to Belgium when she was five, then to Libya when she was eight, then to Hong Kong when she was eleven. Her family moved because her father was in the Foreign Service. Everybody travelled together, Lynn, her parents, and her three brothers. Through her travels Lynn brought with her during her rock collection. At some point her Mother threw the collection away, wondering why she kept moving rocks from continent to continent.

-I grew up in a very peripatetic way, and I was always the foreigner.

When studying art and literature at the Sorbonne and Beaux Arts in Paris, Lynn discovered that she “was an American that had never lived in America,” so she quit school and left for the United States. She chose Boston. During that time she worked at a bookshop and painted in her bathroom, taking Oriental Literature courses at Harvard extension. But Boston was too conservative for Lynn, so she left for Sweden, a much more liberal country.

Lynn arrived to San Francisco looking for sunlight. She had been studying in Sweden, but started getting concerned about becoming a Bergman character after so many months of darkness. Lynn used to go to a library where she would listen to jazz. This is where she met a woman who suggested she could go to California to find her much needed sunlight. Lynn knew very little about the West Coast, her knowledge was basically restricted to the music of the Beach Boys. In 1976 Lynn arrived in SF, where she never knew she would stay.

-I never though I'd become a Californian... but I'm still here.

I go back to her hat, her scarf, her coral... she is too elegant to be Californian.

-You can tell I'm a foreigner.

Every once in a while Lynn is reminded of being foreign in her day to day life: wanting to speak a word, but only finding it in French, unable to find its English equivalent.

Lynn's mother tongue is English, but she learned to read and write in French before English. She even has French handwriting, which is slightly corrupted by having gone to English school. Her handwriting is a combination, as well as her life. Lynn lives in constant translation.

-The reason I'm obsessed with place is because I'm not from a place.

-What makes a space become a place?

-A relation defines a place, an activity. A sense of place is created through interaction.
And smell, place lingers, just like smell.

Lynn studied art in the San Francisco Art Institute, at the height of the structural era in filmmaking of the late 70s. She was originally enrolled in the sculpture program, and it was through the documentation of three-dimensional objects that she found video. Finding resonance in the time based recording medium, but she was fully seduced by the editing process. Given the difficulty of editing video at the time she resorted to literal cutting and sticking back together of the tape.

-What happens if you cut?

Editing film, on the other hand, was easier. Lynn changed the direction of her career then into the world of the moving image. Later on, in 1980, she would continue her degree in film. It was there that she found her voice, amidst the voices of conceptual structural cinema. This was also the time for the height of feminist thought, when the personal was political. Lynn's work became a combination of this feminist project and structuralist thought. There were almost no women teaching: one in film, and none in sculpture. In fact, Lynn was partly attracted to the film program by the presence of women.

An art world with not many women, it is hard to believe.

-Where did your love for conceptualism come from?

-When I was a teenager my aunt gave me Yoko Ono's Grapefruit as a present and it just blew my mind.

Lynn speaks about how she never could have been a painter. Her work is not about high craft or skill, but about "enough craft." But she is not interested in the perfection of things, she is almost not interested in the thing itself, but in the story, the research, and their potential transformations.

-I'm interested in improvisation and working with ideas and how ideas mesh with materials.

-There's skill in thought too.

-There is skill in choosing your collaborators. That way I can work way beyond my knowledge space.

Lynn creates through dialogue with collaborators or machines and processes. She enjoys how there is no hierarchy in collaboration, and the fun. Maybe it is because of these multiple voices that Lynn's work is incredibly difficult to describe, document, and contain on a website.

Many of Lynn's projects take ephemeral forms, and many too, are founded on the concept of listening. One of these projects is *24th Street Listening Project*, made in

collaboration with Alexis Petty in 2012. But, of course, such a constricting category as “public art” will simply not do anything to define this one, or any of her projects.

-I've been very interested in this idea of “public art for nobody,” because I've done a number of projects where people may or may not have known it was art.

Lynn's art is intended to disappear, go unnoticed. She refers to her practice as that of listening and then returning. The final objects she creates are more like echoes. She selected a number of locations that were worthy of being listened to: a park, a church, and a nail salon amongst others. The sounds of the nail salon came back in the form of a price list. The sounds of the Adventist church transubstantiated into the form of a pamphlet, the sounds of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting became a flier. The project was always place-bound. The forms of embedding became a *détournement* of sorts, both spectacular and discrete at the same time. In the park she installed a green sign with the same exact color and size as an official one. In it were reverberations of what she had heard in the space, like a delayed echo.

-When I went to document it there was a man reading the sign. He turned around and he said: “I don't think this is a city sign, I think it might be poetry.”

She used planting trees as an excuse to talk to the neighbors and learn what language they spoke. Then she collected the colors of the houses matching them to Pantone swatches. At the local Benjamin Moore paint shop, she worked on translating the names of the colors to the language spoken inside each home. The project culminated at an event in the Brava theatre, where a story (about an agave blooming party she attended many years ago in one of the houses) was narrated in all the different languages.

-It read in the different languages spoken in the neighborhood, so unless you spoke all the languages you could not understand the whole story.

Lynn's projects exist as stories; they belong to the realm of orality, myth, and the miraculous. She finds documentation to be boring, and ultimately not achieving its purpose but becoming its own thing. Some of her works, such as the *24th Street Listening Project*, live only one day.

-All the work culminates in just one day; like a butterfly they only live for a short time, it's all the sweeter.

Lynn's work exists in another deeper register, definitely not in the surface. For her, art is like a field of enquiry, it talks about movement, time, and space: it is talking about a moment.

-“Public art for nobody,” what goes unnoticed, that is a register too. It's the same as walking down the street and stumbling into something beautiful. You could've missed it walking by, but for those who saw it, it was brilliant and beautiful.

Her works are potentially noticeable, easily dismissible, if you are not attentive to details. Lynn prefers these encounters to those of a gallery or a museum. She does not really make anything that can sell in a gallery. She has been able to support and maintain her practice through teaching and grants.

-Has this allowed your practice to be weirder?

-I suppose I'm not beholden to anybody, so I'm lucky.

When I ask Lynn about how she defines herself and her practice she says that she hates to be considered a filmmaker.

-I am a conceptual artist who uses materials, sometimes.

But, as an undergraduate student she did not like to be considered an artist.

-I hated the idea as an undergraduate. I liked to be a filmmaker because it had to do with labor. You have to work 8 hours, you have to sleep 8 hours, and then there's only 8 hours left to make your work. I liked the labor involved in film-making. I guess I was a filmmaker for a few years and now I am an artist.

I ask Lynn what is the best job she has ever had. Without any hesitance she answers: "teaching." She started teaching right out of graduate school, film at Saint Mary's College in Moraga.

I was teaching film and I knew nothing, so I had to learn so much. Teaching has always been a way to learn for me. I've always made up all the classes so that I could learn new things.

Years later, in 1984 Lynn applied to a job opening at CCA after teaching at SF State. She was hired in the film-video-performance program. Later on she was part of the faculty group—Larry Sultan, Linda Fleming, and Dennis Leon among others—that developed the interdisciplinary graduate program as it exists today. The model was originally discipline bound, but it evolved to include multiple forms of making and the creation of a sense of community.

Lynn really dislikes the idea of a discipline, which her work exceeds in every possible way.

-The world is divided between object makers and the rest. I am an experience maker.

Do you feel like you are the artist you need to be?

- I don't know; I'm trying to be. How do you get outside your own self sometimes?

Lynn speaks of the tools that one needs to find in order to be able to self assess, because after your life as a student is over, getting feedback becomes extremely difficult. Her methods include discussion groups, meditation, conversation, and the I-Ching.

In her work she is constantly avoiding didacticism. She prefers abstraction, a form that does not fix the understanding of the work.

-Maybe I should give people more keys, the way old maps had keys, but I like the way things open so people can bring their own experience.

-How to avoid being too didactic as a teacher?

-I never pronounce; I try to never take a position. I don't talk about the work being bad or good, I talk about the ideas, and then it becomes a conversation. As an artist I make the work and that is only half of it, the viewer does the other half. How to create a chemistry, combustion, electricity... something so that the viewer is willing to participate. My job is to put out enough so that somebody wants to participate. I do that in my teaching too.

Lynn finds her teaching and her art making to align with the notion of exhaustion. How to look at every possible detail of one same thing?

-Right now we live in such distraction, what happens if you dig deeply into something? How do you make something rich because of your exploration?

It seems to be that Lynn's project is one of impossibility. In her projects no one of the forms exhausts the idea. Every project exists in a multiplicity of forms. Like a paradox, all the forms add up to the idea, yet no one of them ultimately achieves singularly to

perform the idea fully. Ultimately, in the sequence of directions her work offers, there is always an impairing absence or a lack.

-You can never have it all.

And that is the nature of an experience. Unlike a painting, Lynn's artworks are not objects you can consume.

-I remember the first time I took my son to see a movie. He was about three and we went to the Smithsonian. He didn't look at the screen first. He was looking at the people, the ceiling... it wasn't about the screen; it was about the totality of the experience.

Lynn's work becomes a quest to unlearn the limits of our perception, to unfocus.

-Quieting the mind. You can unlearn physically by doing something new, because then you realize, wow, there's an entire world... like perfume.

So Lynn insists on the importance of being a student. Just recently she earned an MFA in Writing at CCA. Learning is key, because it is by learning that you realize the limits of what you know, like speaking several languages and living like a nomad in translation. Lynn insists in the importance of speaking and having an accent, travelling and having an accent, coming back home and having an accent. She encourages her students not to translate, not to subtitle, so as to leave their other world embedded, forcing others to realize the limits of what they know.

-I tell my students: be brave enough to live inside your own language, live inside your experience, invite people to come to you.

Lynn insists on avoiding the pressure of normalization. Fighting against the structures that aim to name, differentiate, classify, and give form.

-Change your name, reinvent yourself, become somebody else.

-Do you like your name?

-I had to grow to it. It means waterfall in Gaelic, which I think is nice. I always wanted something more exotic. Someone said to me once "Oh, Lynn Kirby, I thought you were some pipe-smoking guy" because of the name... I use Marie now because I wanted to honor my Grandmother.

Lynn Marie Kirby is a beautiful name. It is also a name that can be pronounced in many different languages.