Dia Chelsea, Keeper of the Avant-Garde Flame

A home of Minimalism has reopened after a transformative renovation and expansion, its purifying vision intact.

By Roberta Smith
April 15, 2021

The saga of the Dia Art Foundation, New York’s venerable nonprofit, begins a new chapter with its return to West Chelsea. Of course it never really left when it decamped for the Hudson Valley. But a welcome back feels appropriate, given the impeccable
But a welcome back feels appropriate, given the impeccable renovation of 20,000 square feet of public space across three buildings, and including a revived bookstore — all reconfigured and unified by Architecture Research Office (ARO).

Dia arrived on the block from SoHo in 1987, rehabilitating a big industrial building from the early 1900s that became its flagship, and staging a string of stunning exhibitions. It triggered the influx of commercial galleries that, for better and worse, made West Chelsea what it is today while also depressing its own attendance: Dia charged admission, the galleries did not. But it didn’t charge admission to its spacious ground-floor bookstore, which was spectacularly tiled and furnished in shades of orange, yellow and turquoise by the artist Jorge Pardo in 2000. The bookstore became a literary magnet, a place for running into people and occasionally buying.

In 2003 the foundation rocked the art world by relocating most operations to Beacon, N.Y., and a much bigger flagship: a 300,000-square-foot factory that it renovated into Dia Beacon. The foundation maintained a foothold in Chelsea: two one-story buildings where exhibitions continued to be staged and, next to it, a six-story building that provided Dia with office space and rental income. But Dia had in reality disappeared from the neighborhood or at least gone underground. Chelsea felt diminished.

The one-story buildings are now the freshly redesigned East Gallery and West Gallery of the new Dia Chelsea. They have been joined to the ground floor of the building next door, which adds a new entrance, lobby, large lecture room and the bookstore. These spaces are united by a subtly patterned brick facade.

The result feels and mostly is new, inside and out, and has a real street presence. The proportions and detail of the exterior — the brickwork for example — make many of the other buildings on the street seem vaguely unkempt or worse. With the completion of this renovation came the announcement that admission would be free.
The reopening is being christened by two pieces commissioned from the installation artist Lucy Raven, known for her work with sound, animation and especially documentary film that explores issues of labor, technology, the mineral wealth and exploitation of the American West, along with the nature of film itself.

Dia has come a long way from its start in SoHo in 1974. In those days it was a boys’ club that showered money and real estate upon a few anointed Minimal, Conceptual and earthwork artists like Walter de Maria, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd and John Chamberlain. Although nonprofit, young Dia was essentially the first mega gallery. Its subtext: money is no object and only a very few artists really merit attention.

But Dia’s spending was curtailed by a near-death brush with financial ruin in the 1990s. And with time, its roster became more
diverse. Its main female member early on was the German Conceptualist Hanne Darboven. Over the decades, she was joined by artists like Agnes Martin, Bridget Riley, Louise Bourgeois, Joan Jonas, Louise Lawler, Mary Corse and Dorothea Rockburne — and now, Lucy Raven.

Yet Dia remains very much the keeper of the Minimal-Conceptual-earthwork flame. Here, as in the looming hush of Dia Beacon, it is still possible to believe in modernist art as a fairly linear progression of abstract, stripped-down-to-essences art movements. Dia is our academy. Its constancy recalls Paul Valéry’s adage that “Everything changes but the avant-garde.”

Raven’s commissions form a perfect inaugural pair. They are remarkably different; one is excellent, the other is fairly weak and the combination makes you think about both the potential and the limitations of Dia’s mandarin point of view.
Installed in the smaller East Gallery, the weaker work is from the artist’s “Caster” series. It consists of two pairs of spotlights whose customized armatures allow them to swivel and point in most directions while remaining attached to the wall, directed by a computer program written by the artist. The four spots roam the floor, walls and ceilings at various speeds, changing in shape, size and crispness as they move. They highlight this interior — with its newly restored steel beams and raw brick walls — bit by bit. But except for its digital precision, the exercise adds little to Minimalism’s vaunted obsession with space and the lengthy tradition of nearly empty galleries as art. It veers too close to an old theater trick of wandering spotlights on an empty stage, making me wish for unseen actors speaking dialogue. Beckett perhaps?

Entering the larger West Gallery for “Ready Mix,” Raven’s second commission, it initially seems possible that this film installation will also ask more than it gives, but no. “Ready Mix” is a real achievement, perhaps a masterpiece. It follows the life cycle of concrete, from the extraction of gravel to large cast forms typical of post-9/11 barricades. The film builds on the aspects of Minimal, Conceptual and Earth art fundamental to the Dia vision, adding layers of economic, ecological and cultural meaning, and providing plenty to look at and think about.
“Ready Mix” is projected on a nearly floor-to-ceiling curved screen held in place by a handsome structure of aluminum beams. The artist had in mind drive-in movies, although the aluminum bleachers from which the film can be viewed are more redolent of summertime outdoor movies.

All the silvery aluminum complements the elegant tones of this black-and-white film, creating a color-free world in which a tale of two instruments, metaphorically speaking, unfolds. The first is that of a giant open-air complex of machines and sites that, ultimately, yield the concrete. It encompasses gravel pits, earthmovers, blocklong dump trucks, even longer conveyor belts, immense chutes and concrete mixing trucks. All of these are arrayed in the flat, sunstruck emptiness of Idaho and seem to operate on their own, without a person in sight until the very end.

The second is the camera itself, recording this implicitly brutal process through a disorienting combination of close-ups that sometimes take us inside the machines or look down in dazzling aerial views shot using a drone. We see masses of rocks and pebbles being mechanically sorted fill the screen. Different grades of gravel are sometimes still and nearly abstract; other times they rush past in a blur. Then the action jumps to a bird’s-eye view as the camera wheels in sync with the earth movers or conveyor belts. Either way, scale can become mutable, hard to measure, which is riveting.
This a beautiful, enthralling, sobering film. It is also a compelling one, its inherent drama enhanced by a soundtrack that combines recorded ambient sound with tracks of performed and digital music, achieved by Raven in collaboration with the composer and percussionist Deantoni Parks. Altogether it provides an indelible view of the relentless giantism of 21st-century industry and its tendencies to ruin, overbuild, waste and pollute. At the end, we see concrete cast into huge building blocks that are hoisted into rows as if to wall out the world outside.

The excellence of “Ready Mix” exemplifies the singularity and importance of Dia and its sometimes narrow faith in artistic progress, just as the all-but-new building reflects its high standards of design. On both counts, it is beyond great to see its purifying vision back on West 22nd Street. In the city that never sleeps, the Dia Art Foundation seems, after a hiatus, fully awake.

Lucy Raven

Through Jan. 2022, Dia Chelsea, 537 West 22nd Street, 845-231-0811; diaart.org. Timed entry tickets required.
Lucy Raven has dedicated much of her work to the revitalization of the American West, both in its literal, topographic emplacement and within a historical imaginary. Between film, light sculptures, installation, and stereoscopic animation, her examinations of terrestrial surveying and digital visualities, as well as the spectacular constructions and everyday mundanities of the built landscape, offer a fascinating peek into a postindustrial frontier and its extractive economies. Raven’s newest exhibition continues her work with light installation and includes the forty-five-minute film Ready Mix, which documents the workings of an Idaho concrete plant through a series of optical and durational experiments. The show runs from April 16 through January 2022 at Dia Chelsea in New York.

I WAS BORN IN TUSCON and grew up there. I feel a strong connection to Arizona, to the West, and a number of states that I’ve spent time in: California, Utah, Nevada, Idaho. But at the same time it always felt kind of arbitrary that I grew there, so far from where generations of my family had been before, coming from Eastern Europe through Canada on one side and New York on the other, before my mother’s parents moved to Tucson. Looking back, I can see that I had a relationship with the landscape that in one sense was very embodied, and at the same time existed independently of me, with a history that preceded and did not include me. There were moments of physical remove, like getting on an airplane for the first time as a kid and seeing the desert landscape from above, the drainage ponds and agricultural fields. A very abstracted, geometric view.
That sense of abstraction in relation to the place was imprinted on me from very early on but was also hard to parse. On one hand, I could clearly see geomorphic and infrastructural forms in proximity all around me; and junk, leftovers from old ideas and ambitions that are still laying around. But I also grew up understanding that there are more things present that you can’t see. There is a kind of vagueness to the physical experience of being in the desert, as opposed to how it’s often pictured. It’s not always clear where the foreground ends and the background begins, and the iconic image of a lone figure in the open landscape, something typical like a cowboy riding into the sunset, is evasive. Posing alternatives to linear, fixed-point perspective, a vanishing point on the horizon, is something I thought a lot about when making Ready Mix.

Both of my previous films, China Town (2009) and Curtains (2014), used forms of animation in relation to landscape and its extraction and distribution. In China Town, which tracked a small Nevada mine’s export of raw copper ore to China, I used photographic animation, sequences of still images joined together. In Curtains (2014), a sequel of sorts which explores the outsourcing of Hollywood’s raw imagery to post-production studios around the world to be converted from 2-D to 3-D, I animated 3-D photographs to come in and out of stereo convergence. Both works were experiments in discontinuity in relation to commodity flows that have a direct relationship to geography and ownership.

I think the technological development of moving image cameras alongside the popularity of the western as a film genre has contributed to our collective imaginary, and image, of the Western landscape. Those films were predicated on a fantasy of the empty West, available to be settled, that depends on a very selective mode of looking, or not looking, at who and what is already living on that land. I was interested in the material creation of private property, historic and contemporary, and the forces behind those processes as another way of considering what a western could be.
I shot Ready Mix in Idaho, where a friend of a friend owns a concrete plant. When I was first there, I just asked to take a look around. And I got a visual idea of what I wanted to do with it right away. I’d already been experimenting with different materials like sand, glass beads, gel, using what’s called analog modeling to design relationships between liquids and solids in natural and built combinations as they undergo different degrees of pressure: state change. So, when we started filming some of the materials that were moving very quickly during the batching process, like gravel pouring down a chute, I saw that a kind of optical liquidity, in that case a blur, was possible to capture in the image. The camera operators I was working with usually film sports like snowboarding and cycling. So, it was a very different kind of shoot for them in some ways. Maybe messier. But we developed a language onsite for approaching the camera’s movements and point of view as well as a choreography between the drone camera and the front loaders it was filming.

There’s nothing like starting a chat with someone who says, “What are you working on?” And you say a film about concrete. It’s an instant conversation stopper. I think it’s something about concrete’s heavy dumbness as a form, as a material that needs a form to be of use. There is musique concrète and concrete poetry. Why not concrete cinema, then?

— As told to Erik Morse
Among the great legacies of the Dia Art Foundation, founded in 1974, in New York City, are the earthworks of the American West. The sites Dia stewards include Robert Smithson’s “Spiral Jetty,” in Utah’s Great Salt Lake, and Walter de Maria’s “Lightning Field,” in rural New Mexico. Of course, land art was largely a boys’ club—because the boys got the backing. Jessica Morgan, the director of Dia since 2015, has been working to change that. Nancy Holt’s “Sun Tunnels,” which have graced the Great Basin Desert since the mid-seventies, recently joined the collection. And inaugurating the new Dia Chelsea, an impeccably renovated twenty-thousand-square-foot space on West Twenty-second Street, is “Ready Mix” (pictured above), a mesmerizing black-and-white film by Lucy Raven, which both builds on and breaks down (even takes down) the genre of land art and its extractive toll on the Western landscape. The setting is a concrete factory in Idaho; if fifty minutes of seeing solid rock become oozing concrete sounds about as exciting as watching paint dry, the film’s strange beauty and conceptual provocations are bound to surprise you. (“Ready Mix” is on view through January; reservations, available via diaart.org, are required.)

— Andrea K. Scott
Lucy Raven with David Levi Strauss

“I was interested in taking some of the tropes of the genre, like extreme violence and the image of the open frontier as natural setting, and grinding them through another set of operations.”

I met Lucy Raven 17 years ago, in 2004, when she was working as an editor at BOMB Magazine. She had read my books Between Dog & Wolf (1999) and Between the Eyes (2003), and approached me about being interviewed for BOMB's new “Theory + Practice” section. When she asked who I’d like to be interviewed by, I said Leon Golub, because he and I had been having an extended conversation, and since Lucy was also very interested in Golub’s work, we set that up. The night before the three of us were going to meet to record the conversation, Leon called me and said he didn’t think he was going to be able to come to the recording session, because he was on his way into the emergency room at NYU Hospital. “Leon, what’s wrong?” I asked. “Everything,” he said. “Is there anything I can do for you?” “Yeah,” he said, “you can go find me another body.” He died a month later. We ended up doing the BOMB interview with Hakim Bey asking the questions, and that was published in the Fall 2004 issue.
Lucy and I began our own conversation that continued over the next year, as Lucy entered the Bard MFA program, where I’d been teaching for years. She graduated in 2008, with her film China Town as her final project. We collaborated on various projects after that, and continued our conversation through the years. In 2010, I hired Lucy to teach in my MFA program in Art Criticism & Writing at the School of Visual Arts, and then again in 2013 and 2015, on motion capture.

We sat down in the “Zoom room” on June 9th to talk about Lucy’s installation at the new Dia Chelsea.

David Levi Strauss (Rail): I’ve been able to spend some time with your new installation at Dia Chelsea over the last couple of weeks. It consists of two parts, in two magnificent cavernous spaces: Casters X-2 + X-3, which are two kinetic light sculptures casting beams that sweep the darkened space; and the 45-minute, black-and-white film Ready Mix, shot over two years at a concrete plant in south central Idaho. The film is projected at an anamorphic aspect ratio on a giant curved screen, in front of aluminum bleacher seating, flanked by four massive speakers for quadraphonic sound.

My first impression of the Casters piece was as a combination of spotlights and searchlights, bringing Hollywood/consumer spectacle and the carceral/surveillance state into the crosshairs, and that mixture of spectacle and confinement seemed very timely as the pandemic was just wearing down in New York—the pandemic that spotlighted all of the enduring political atrocities in American society. Casters was also an extremely pared down way of doing cinema—without an “image.” Erika Balsom called an earlier version of Casters “an active iconoclastic reduction.”
But the larger space with the _Ready Mix_ film is a full immersion in sight and sound. That immersion is vertiginous and mesmerizing, a slowed-down epic of resource extraction and the seething _matter_ of development.

I’ll point to two passages in the film that caught me and remain in memory. One is the place where the activated grid of a sorting, sifting screen, with stones being thrown around madly, is accompanied by what I think is live sound combined with composed sound, to heighten the frenetic sense. And at a certain point, the whole space, and the whole building, is activated, from the reflective concrete floor to the vaulted ceilings, and it made me remember why Dia is in that space, and why this piece is there, now.

And another passage is when the black center of a cement mixer, I guess, becomes the pupil of an enormous screen-filling eye, and then shifts to become this great maw of consumption and unlimited growth, the kind of infernal maw that consumes everything.

So, from the concrete to the abstract. You’ve talked elsewhere about proposing abstraction as a tool for re-perceiving these sites. How are you using abstraction here in these new pieces?
Lucy Raven: The first iteration of Casters was developed in the aftermath of a body of work that dealt with Hollywood’s outsourcing of images and contemporary digital image production in a very real global geography, economy, and quite complex labor situation. I was questioning the role of story, and the relationship between traditional narrative and contemporary image production. I found myself looking for other models of formal and experiential possibilities for moving images and collective viewing.

In Moholy-Nagy’s writings about the potential of moving images back in the 1920s, he asked why film needs to be horizontal, or projected onto a flat surface at all. He wrote about this assumption as the extension of the proscenium in theater and ultimately in literature, a regressive position, when film’s inherent medium is light and movement in time. He responded with his own light-space modulators, but I feel like he also laid out ontological ground for cinema that hasn’t been extensively developed.

You’ve written a lot about the power of images and how the transport mechanism matters, and in this iteration of the work, I was interested in thinking about that in relation to civic space, and what it would mean to be spending time in a shared space with other people, coming out of the last year and a half.

The Casters move using a system invented for a WWII era anti-aircraft device, which allowed an enemy aircraft to be tracked in any direction without getting its power source tangled as it spun.

The Whitney brothers detourned a surplus version of the system to make the first computer graphics, slowing spinning spirals which ended up in Hitchcock’s Vertigo (1958), and then Michael Snow used it to make the device for filming La Région Centrale (1971). Those first explorations had a relationship to abstraction, but also an origin in militarized optics and tracking that I wanted to pursue. The two works play out a choreography over two hours, moving through a series of “locked-off” positions in relation to each other. Their pace is slow, relentless.

When I started filming Ready Mix, I thought about how the term “concrete cinema” doesn’t exist, and what it might mean. I realized I’d proposed one answer to that question with the first version of Casters, a work I’d been wanting to iterate.
**Rail:** A close correlative to concrete cinema might be structuralist film. I’ve always had a conflicted relation to structuralist materialist film, and I wrote something on Kurt Kren (Malcolm Le Grice called Kren’s *Bäume im Herbst/Trees in Autumn* in 1960 the first structuralist film) in the ’80s for the Cinematheque in San Francisco that engaged the conflict. It was called “Notes on Kren: Cutting Through Structural Materialism or, ‘Sorry. It Had To Be Done.’”

And in that essay, I quoted Le Grice from his *Abstract Film and Beyond* to say, “In effect, structuralism in art can be seen as a consequence of the awareness that concept can, and perhaps must, determine the nature of perception and experience if it is to avoid determination by existing convention or habit.”

You wrote to me in July 2020 to say you were filming your “concrete film” in Idaho. And you wrote, “I see it as a kind of Western, a material examination of *state change*, solids to liquid to solid, and also an examination of the literal foundation(s) and (infra)structure the country was built upon, particularly the West in the myth of the frontier as an empty wilderness/horizon.” When I read that, it made me think of Joseph Beuys and John Ford, who have probably never been put together before, but...

**Raven:** I like it.
**Rail:** Because, when I walked out of your installation at Dia, I ran into the basalt columns and trees of *7000 Eichen* on 22nd Street, and it struck me then to see them with their feet stuck in concrete, because that freezes the whole process, which is the alchemical/spagyric process and the sculptural principle of the transformation from cold, crystalline form to warm, organic form, and back again, that Beuys intended to activate.

And then John Ford, you know, I think I mentioned to you that the first movie I ever saw, in the little ramshackle theater in Chapman, Kansas when I was 9 or 10, was Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. And now I see it every few years, and to me it's sort of the perfect Western, a revisionist Western infused with John Ford's weird politics. And it was shot in Thousand Oaks!

**Raven:** I think moving to New York from the West, from Arizona, I was confronted with people's view of that place when they would find out I was from there. It felt like a kind of brand, often associated with a very conservative politics that the state was known for (though that seems to slowly be changing) but also a romanticized notion of the desert, and its remoteness from “The City.” I think even as a young person in Tucson, though, I felt aware that my family had moved there, and not that long before. I was from there, but I also felt it as a distance from my Eastern European Jewish ancestry, and from New York, where we’d go visit my grandmother, which I found totally thrilling. I understood their movement to the Southwest in the context of a fresh start and a restorative climate for my parents and grandparents' generation. Perhaps the myth of the frontier perpetuated in Westerns like *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* I'd in my own way internalized in trying to figure out how we ended up there. For me, the setting for films and TV I watched, for action, was in a city. The desert landscape wasn’t reproduced in media very much, other than in Westerns, or in cartoons like Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner, which I loved, or Krazy Kat. I thought about cartoons, and the sound that goes with them (or in the case of Krazy, the onomatopoeia George Herriman wrote into the drawings), for this film quite a lot. But growing up, I found Westerns boring. There were no women in them, for one...

**Rail:** Well, there are women, but they're mostly all entertaining men in the cantina, or—

**Raven:** Yeah, or in the whorehouse.

Old Tucson, which is a theme park that I’d go to a couple times a year as a kid when family would visit, was actually where a lot of Westerns were filmed. So you’d head to the outskirts of town to a set that used the same landscape you'd
pass on the drive there as a stage for live gunfight shows and film shoots, then head back through it, home to the TV. The Westerns I would watch, which were older Westerns, had the same backdrop, but none of them carried the feeling that I associated with living in that area, which is a kind of vagueness, somehow, to the landscape, and to perspective, where in the harsh sunlight, everything is a bit too bright. There's not really a focus, no city center, rather a constantly developing sprawl that gets over-articulated because it is spread out and single story, positioned just right to frame a continuous pan through the backseat car window. It didn't jive with the pristine, empty horizon of the Western with a single cowboy riding through it.

I was interested in taking some of the tropes of the genre, like extreme violence and the image of the open frontier as natural setting, and grinding them through another set of operations.

The idea of state change was something that I was interested in from the very beginning, but came more into focus as I began to shoot and edit. It became clear to me that the film would be a loop; a rechurning of this same material that is both marked and unbothered by repetition.

**Rail:** The production of cement is an alchemical process. You know, I'm sitting here now, only a few miles away from Rosendale, New York, where a kind of natural hydraulic cement was discovered in the 1820s and the concrete that came from here built a big part of New York City, including the Brooklyn Bridge and the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. Then portland cement came in the 20th century and wiped out that whole industry here. The canal system and all the rest of the infrastructure around here just collapsed when that went away. We live in the ruins of it.

When I talk with people about the piece at Dia, you know, people talk about concrete and cement production being one of the biggest contributors to climate change, because the production process releases so much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. If concrete were a country, it would be number three, after China and the US, in CO2 pollution. And that's significant because it is the most prevalent artificial material in the world. The only thing we consume more of is *water.* Concrete is everywhere, especially in China. Since 2003, China has poured more concrete every three years than the US did in the entire 20th century. And today, China uses almost half of the world's concrete. So, all roads lead back to China, again.

**Raven:** Again. Exactly, I know.
**Rail:** I watched your making of the *China Town* film 12 years ago very closely. It tracks the mining of copper ore in Nevada to China, where it is sent to be smelted and refined and turned into copper wire and other things. It's basically a handmade film of photographic animation, built up from 7000 individual images. So, *China Town* was built up from still images, and *Ready Mix* is really all about the movement and flow, even the blur. In another interview, you talked about “that purgatorial zone between still and moving images.” Still images lodge in the brain with more longevity than moving images, but moving images have more immediate effects. How do you think about the movement from *China Town* to *Ready Mix* in those terms?

**Raven:** They're very different sculpturally and compositionally. And you're right that they function differently. I'm still thinking about that thing you said about stills lodging in the brain. I've had my students at Cooper reading your new book *Photography and Belief*.

There is one scene in *China Town* that I think especially informed a lot of the work that came after. It's the scene where a woman is walking up a chute away from the camera while raw ore is coming down it. Using that method of photographic animation, everything in each scene moves at the same rate of change, because the only interval you have is the time between still frames. And because they're photographs, each object within the photo is fixed in position, so her walk advances at the exact same rate as the movement of material. Even if you don't know how quickly stuff moves on a conveyor belt of that scale, you intuitively know that those two kinds of movement don't happen in sync, because one is organic and biological and the other is mechanical. That effect is true of the whole film, but editing that scene unlocked it for me.
I was interested in the idea of a figure’s movement yoked to a mechanical time signature, both within the image, but also within that kind of edit. In a way, it’s the opposite of stop-action animation where you take things that are inanimate and you make them look like they’re moving. It was this kind of rhythmic restructuring that led me to explore different questions about motion capture, motion control, and movement.

**Rail:** I always talk with my students about slowing the mechanism down enough so you can see its moving parts, and this has become a central working practice with you, both concretely and abstractly.

**Raven:** I’ve generally worked outside of the standard capture rate, and playback rate for moving images, and instead built something that can operate outside of the corporatized speed of production and reception that’s inherent to all of our technologies, to the point of seeming naturalized. One strategy to avoid reiterating the ideologies out of which those tools are designed to function is to use animation and hand build a sequence, shaping the rhythm as you go.

In *Ready Mix*, when I was experimenting with different ways to film the material flows and scale transitions, I started with a very high frame rate. The kind of state change I was interested in was a material shift from a granular array to a viscous liquid to a homogeneous solid that goes through, as you mentioned, an alchemical cycle, and I found that could also happen optically in the film when I slowed the frame rate down to the standard 24 frames per second. The movement of material was too fast to be captured in focus at that speed—there was too much information for the signal to carry, and the result is an artifact: a blur.
**Rail:** This might be a good time to talk about the sound. Because the soundtrack of *Ready Mix* is also somewhat different than what I’ve heard you do before. The sound is enveloping, but never overpowering. The mixture of captured sound and composed sound is intricate. Are there times when the sound—this may just be in my imagination or an aural hallucination, but—are there times when the sound of film going through the gate of a projector is actually audible? Like the sound of an SLR mirror slapping up when you take a digital picture with your phone?

**Raven:** No, but that’s great. The musician I worked with, Deantoni Parks, and I are actually making a vinyl record right now, derived from sound in the film. We’re using the conceit of the film soundtrack as a guide, working primarily with the composed sound, which in the film, as you noted, was mixed with production sound from the shoot in a way that’s difficult to separate. He’s also doing a couple of remixes—EDM!

Deantoni Parks is a percussionist and composer I met through Jason Moran, when we were both part of a series Jason curated at the Park Avenue Armory a number of years ago. I initially connected with his *Technoself* project, where he’s drumming with one hand and playing a MIDI with the other, sampling very granular bits of music, half- and quarter-notes. I’d been more finely cutting the time signature of animations I was working on, using a 60-frame-per-second timeline, and felt an affinity to how we were each thinking about breaking up and reassembling image and sound. I’d recently been asked by Dia to do one of their “Artists on Artists” talks—my first engagement with them—and I’d selected Walter De Maria. I knew that De Maria had been a drummer for this proto-Velvet Underground band called the Primitives, but wanted to dig deeper into that, because when I’d heard it years before, it totally reformed my thinking about his work, and how it relates to interval.

I was compelled by the relation of violence and abstraction in De Maria’s work, and drumming seemed like one way in. I asked Deantoni to collaborate with me, and we made a work, a live performance, called *Bullet Points for a Hard Western.* I’d thought from the start that I would ask him to work on *Ready Mix* with me. Then when I started filming, I found the actual production sound was incredible, so rich, and very percussive. And so for a moment I thought maybe I’d just use natural sound. But while shooting at the gravel plant on a subsequent trip, I heard all of these different resonances, and occasional sweeps of bass that seemed to overtake the plant, then disappear. I asked the plant manager what was going on and he told me that each of these machines run at different frequencies, so you’re hearing where they overlap and collide. I knew then that I wanted to explore that idea further and to take the sound out of the realm of complete naturalism.
We thought a lot about perspective and scale in the sound, as well as in the image. Something that I was interested in was how to use sound musically without asserting too much of an emotional affect, or feeling romantic, which is really quite challenging, particularly with the scale of the film. So there was a lot of back and forth and Deantoni was able to do these subtle, incredible things.

**Rail:** *Ready Mix* focuses on machine work. And it’s mostly unpopulated, but the human workers who do appear in only a few cases, like the two men helping to guide the concrete blocks into place in the wall, are pretty hapless and ineffectual. And their position is obviously precarious in relation to these massive machines, and to the whole process. They’re out of place.

**Raven:** It may make sense here to go back to this question of abstraction, which can be a mode that allows you to project yourself into a different space than the one you’re in, either through identification or through another kind of projection—including how the humans who appear in the film are perceived. This range of imaginative association that abstraction can instigate is something I’m really interested in.

I wanted to engage a register wherein the violence of development would come through a kind of ambivalence to the human, to a human time scale, or the scale of the human body, or the laboring body. A structural/infrastructural violence that nonetheless is not without human intention. Quite the opposite.

What does a Western without a human at the center of it look like? Where landscape is not a readymade, but something that’s formed and terra-formed and populated?
**Rail:** Ready-mixed, not ready-made. It seems to me that the distinction between concrete objects and abstraction has broken down in the realm of the virtual, and this collapse has certainly affected our relation to the real, and shaken the whole question of cause and effect.

**Raven:** There’s a physical dumbness to concrete that has to do with its opacity and its weight. I think about Guston’s paintings of walls, also of eyes... Its form is necessarily *formed*—it has no structural integrity until it hardens and is shaped by some form extrinsic to it as material. So cause and effect press together and have to dry.

Can you say more about how you’re thinking about that collapse?

**Rail:** Well, the concrete has devolved into what you describe here—it sets up within given forms, in negative space, like Rachel Whiteread recognized. When I was 18, I worked on a construction crew building bridges for the highways in western Kansas, and most of what we did was build forms for concrete—forms that were later dismantled, leaving this malleable material that has a shape and substance, and some resilience, and is now ubiquitous, but it has no real form of its own. And this reactive stuff has come to replace active forms in the environment.

**Raven:** In the realm of the virtual, that distinction is harder to see, and to fathom. So it’s easy to take the material we *do* see and navigate through it as active, rather than formed.

**Rail:** How are the drone camera movements in *Ready Mix* so sharp and always in register?

**Raven:** Well, I was working with two great camera operators, Spencer Cordovano and Yancy Caldwell. Yancy was on drone. He’s usually filming snowboarders and mountain bikers, so he’s quite good at tracking, and has incredible control. But he’s used to a quite different kind of camera movement, so this was very challenging.

There is a sometimes-sublimated militaristic optics to drone technology that I felt I had to contend with one way or another. At the same time, I wanted the camera to have an indelibly linked relationship to the material it was filming. So a choreography developed, and a language to describe it, between the camera and the material or vehicle it was following. The way you operate those vehicles is with a joystick, which is also the way a drone is operated. So the tether between camera and machine/material is triangulated by a disembodied hand that may control both.
Rail: And the control is really in the fingers. Literally, “manoeuvres.”

What in your mind is your connection to the historical artists represented by Dia, especially the Land artists of the ’70s, because it’s something that people think about as Dia goes into this new realm. Some of the connections are obvious to me. But how are you thinking about that now?

Raven: The relationship we have now to land and landscape and images is so different—the supersaturation of time spent looking at screens and technical images, the digital universe that continues to unfold against an abstracted, if omnipresent relationship to very slowly evolving conditions, like climate change or nuclear radiation and fallout, and the impending nuclear waste reality. Lucy Lippard has written about much of Land art’s preoccupation with site over place, and that resonates with me, thinking about and visiting that work today. At the same time, the kind of care and support Dia has offered artists and their work over very long periods of time, then and now—these commissions developed over two years—is a part of their original model that today feels radical in its commitment.

When I went to De Maria’s The Lightning Field a couple of years ago, I felt the violence I’ve always projected onto his work affirmed. Is this Cartesian grid that’s laid out on the landscape a critique, or is it a reiteration of that same kind of logic, of colonialist, surveying development? Maybe it functions as both. I do know I’m coming to the work, and to the idea of monument in relation to place, with a different set of concerns than I think a lot of those artists had at that time.

I think that there are tools in abstraction that feel relevant right now. That there can be room for a kind of individuated projection to happen over time in a collective space. To be in that space right now with others, to me feels grounding.

Contributor

David Levi Strauss

David Levi Strauss is an American poet, essayist, art and cultural critic, and educator. He is a consulting editor at the Rail.
Confronting Land Art and the Western frontier: Lucy Raven on how the two US cultural legacies influenced her new works at Dia Chelsea

New York-based artist’s exhibitions opens at Dia Art Foundation’s new and improved space in New York

Lucy Raven’s protean, multidisciplinary practice defies simple definition. Over the past two decades, the Arizona-born, New York-based artist has drilled into the American bedrock and filmic history through experiments in light and moving image. Two new commissions for Dia Chelsea’s grand reopening—a two-year, $20m expansion—boldly question the Land Art legacy Dia exists to enhance. Casters is a version of the slowly revolving spotlight installation Raven first showed at London’s Serpentine Gallery in 2016. Ready Mix, meanwhile, is an immersive projection of mesmeric black-and-white footage showing aggregate and cement being churned into ready-mix concrete. From extractive industries to industrial networks, Raven consistently focuses on the through-lines of a global economy etching itself into the landscape.
The Art Newspaper: You shot Ready Mix in a concrete processing plant in Idaho. In the accompanying materials, the film is described as contending with the myth of the frontier perpetuated by traditional Westerns. What does the film stem from?

Lucy Raven: I’m from [Tuscon] Arizona. As a kid, my dad would bring us to New York, where he is from. I really didn’t understand why he’d ever moved to the desert: I just wanted to come back here. Later, when I actually moved here, I began to see how the [American] east looks at the west. This project, and maybe quite a lot of work I’ve made, is an exploration of the fantasy of the west. I don’t really like Westerns. I find them quite boring; there are never any interesting female characters; it’s just dusty. This was more about how the west has been developed—the infrastructure necessary to quite literally pave over this so-called empty wilderness, which of course was populated.

It all started through a residency I did in the Philippines several years ago. I flew into Clark air base, [which had been] the biggest American military base outside the US. While there, I thought about how the late 19th-century American colonisation of the Philippines—not something I ever learned about in school—is not an aberration but rather part and parcel of the American doctrine of manifest destiny, and the so-called settling of the west. When California was, essentially, full, and the frontier declared closed, the purchase of the Philippines along with Puerto Rico and Guam happened, in 1898. All these forms of state architecture and concrete infrastructure in Manila came along at that moment too. So when I got back to the States, I decided to get kind of literal, and do a site visit at a concrete plant.
Why Idaho?

My partner and I have a cabin there. And in movie terms, Idaho is a kind of stand-in for the west in general. I also realised that if I made a concrete film in New York, it would be like a mob film so I knew I had to make a Western, out west.

**The camera’s perspective and decisions are intriguingly tangible in the footage. Did you conceive of the camera as a character?**

You know, we have *musique concrète*, concrete photography, concrete poetry. Going into this project, I wondered, what might the term “concrete cinema” mean? Instead of naturalising the eye of the camera, I thought about it choreographically. The drone shots, for example, are not shot the way a drone operator normally would: it’s almost misuse. Similarly, in order to shoot these flows and pourings of raw materials, you would usually use a higher frame rate, because it is all moving so fast. But I was really interested in that blur, the in and out of focus.

![Aerial shots in Ready Mix were “not shot the way a drone operator normally would: it’s almost misuse”, Raven says](https://example.com/123)

**Certain scenes in Ready Mix bring to mind the surprising abstract paintings of, say, Michael Heizer. Were you consciously making a connection between Abstract Expressionism, and what the Land artists made in the desert?**

There ended up being so many sections that I now think of as, like, the Frankenthaler scene, the Pollock scene, the Heizer spill. While filming, though, I wasn’t thinking about that. It isn’t something you usually think of when you think about Land Art.

**Of course, the big three—James Turrell’s *Roden Crater*, Michael Heizer’s *City* and Charles Ross’s *Star Axis*—are all nearing completion. Your work feels like an important counterpoint to these big, very male, very white projects, be that when you speak about the myth of the west or when you speak about Westerns having no strong female characters, given the women who have played central roles in, say, *City*, yet remain overshadowed.**
I think about this a lot, having visited many of those sites, and seen the caretaking that goes into maintaining them. Ready Mix has a monumentality to it, in the way it will be projected, and also within the image itself. But it is not an imposition on to the landscape, which those works are. My question is, whose perspective is being projected there? I’ve always thought of works by, for example, Walter de Maria, as having a kind of violence to them. But it wasn’t until I visited [his 1977 work] The Lightning Field at last year that I began to understand why. First, I hadn’t ever really internalised that all those poles are spikes. But also, the violence is in the very grid he’s laying out—it’s a Cartesian projection on to the landscape, and a neutrality that’s hard to parse. Is the work about the violence, or is it enacting it? I think that question is provocative.

Abstract Expressionism, and Land Art, of course, dealt in universality. But you’re making abstract images with raw materials that have been mined as resources, and are sold as commodities. You have referenced Robert Smithson’s idea of the exhaustion of the landscape. With Ready Mix are you delving into the kind of specifics those movements did not address—that is, whose land is being depleted? Who has been robbed of resources?

This notion of private property became quite central in Ready Mix. On one side, you have the development of public infrastructural projects. And on the other, you have what’s called the Dawes Act of 1887: the development of private property and the disenfranchisement of the indigenous peoples who lived there to begin with. Concrete is tied to the creation of private property, which immediately leads you to the protection of private property, which circles back to the police and the militarisation of protecting private property, and to the beginnings of film-making too—because those histories are so deeply intertwined. All of which is what Casters came out of.

This new iteration of Casters involves two pairs of moving spotlights on customised armatures similar to roto-casters—devices used to mould objects in the round. What was the impetus for this work?

Casters evolved from a previous 3D film entitled Curtains, [as well as] Tales of Love and Fear, which involved these two counter-rotating projectors. I was thinking about Robert Smithson, but also Michael Snow’s 1971 film, La Région Centrale. Snow, a Canadian structural film-maker, had this idea to make a kind of total or absolute record of the landscape. He used an articulated robotic arm to shoot the view from the top of a mountain in Quebec. When you watch it, you’re watching the horizon spinning, slowly. I wanted to see if you could have a record of a place that was absolute at the site of reception, rather than production. I was interested in liberating the medium from the frame. In its first iteration, Casters felt like the beginning of a way of thinking about light and motion that I knew I’d been looking for.

The light becomes a presence in the room and a way to describe that physical space too. Is there a bodily aspect to the piece, for you?

Another starting point was a visit I’d made to the rock-cut temple of Ajanta in India. The temple is filled with all these paintings, which you can only observe by
flashlight. You end up with this haptic connection between what your hand is holding—a light—and what your eye can see. There is something about touch, and physicality, in *Casters*. And then there’s the carceral aspect: searchlights, much like the amplified slip rings used in Snow’s piece and in the *Casters* machines (to allow for 360° rotation without the wires getting tangled), evolved out of military equipment.

**The lights’ tracing is relentless, ominous, inescapable. How did you determine the patterns they would follow?**

I knew what I wanted these things to do. And my friend Robert de Saint Phalle made it happen. I was thinking about the spiral animations John Whitney made for Alfred Hitchcock’s [1958 film] *Vertigo*, which are thought of as the first computer animations. We made rudimentary visualisations to figure out patterns and pacing. But here too, it is a kind of choreography, and as such needs to be staged and programmed in the space itself. It is tricky to get something to move super slowly and really smoothly.

**And those mechanisms determine what it sounds like in the space too?**

Exactly. Like, how loud is too loud? The other way I’ve been trying to think about the movement has been through drawing. Particularly during the pandemic. They started out as technical drawings and then became their own thing—a non-linguistic way for me to think through ideas about light and speed in space.

**Biography**

**Born:** 1977, Tucson, Arizona.

**Lives:** New York

**Education:** 2008 MFA, Bard Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts, Annandale-on-Hudson; 2000 BFA studio art, BA art history, University of Arizona, Tucson; 1999 Escola Massana, Centre D’Art i Disseny, Barcelona


**Not currently represented**

- [Lucy Raven](https://www.lucyraven.com), Dia Chelsea, New York, 15 April- January 2022
- Read Linda Yablonsky’s review of the exhibition [here](https://www.thenewyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/linda-yablonsky-lucy-raven-dia-chesapeake-bay)