

Perspectives 158: **KELLY NIPPER**

Kamps, Toby, Perspectives 158: Kelly Nipper, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2007

KELLY NIPPER

Toby Kamps

In the many, oftentimes freeform, telephone conversations leading up to this essay, Los Angeles-based artist Kelly Nipper discussed her wide-ranging and eclectic interests: Merce Cunningham's dance compositions, Rudolf Laban's system for analyzing and recording human movement, the process of hurricane formation, artist Allan Kaprow's Happenings, anthropologist Edward T. Hall's theory of personal space called "proxemics," Modernist typography, British mystic Aleister Crowley's theories of the occult, theories of time, and the dynamics of human relationships. In one of the digressions or sub-digressions that characterized these calls, she also mentioned she owns the DVD *The Best of The Electric Company*, a fact that—she realized—provided an important clue to how these diverse influences come together in her spare, painstakingly composed photographs, video works, and choreographed performances.

Airing on PBS from 1971 to 1977, the educational television program *The Electric Company* taught grade-schoolers reading and vocabulary skills through live-action skits and songs as well as animations and cartoons. A cast of singing and dancing children, along with accomplished actors and comedians, including Mel Brooks, Bill Cosby, Morgan Freeman, and Rita Moreno, inculcated the rudiments of linguistic theory in children through catchy, rapid-fire sound-and

image-bites. It is not surprising that this visually inventive series should appeal to Nipper. The video and photographic works in this exhibition share many formal characteristics with the television show: bright, even lighting, powerful colors, spare sets, and a kind of submerged didacticism. *The Electric Company* also sparks memories of her childhood in Minneapolis, one of America's more utopian cities. She remembers gym-class exercises reminiscent of the group activities on the show—drills like inflating and ducking under surplus parachutes—that provided an important, "socially interactive" counterpoint to the gray, flat, empty landscapes of Minnesota's long winters. However, for Nipper, it is the structure of the television show that is most inspirational: "For me, *The Electric Company* was an educational experiment for a mass audience using shape, color, two-dimensional space, and technology to creatively illustrate and explore the basic principles of communication and forming relationships, which is not so different from the work of Cunningham and Kaprow."

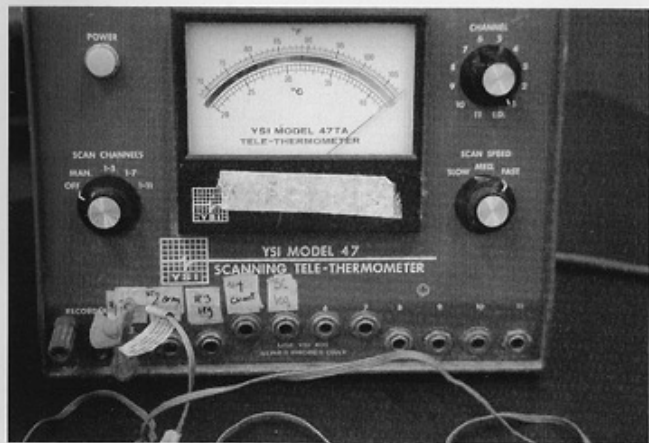
The exhibition *Perspectives 158: Kelly Nipper* presents a video installation *An Arrangement for the Architect and a Darkroom Timer* (2005), a single color photograph, *The Future* (2006), and three groups of photographs, *Weather Center* (2006), *Love with the*

Sound Technician (2004), and *Evergreen* (2005). *An Arrangement for the Architect* ... consists of a large-scale video projection of an encounter between a man and a woman. In a studio illuminated with red light, Nipper placed two performers who had never met, Silke Taprogge and Jesse Gillian, facing each other less than a foot apart and recorded the profiles of their upper bodies from the side using a fixed camera. The resulting document is a fascinating record of what happens when two strangers are forced uncomfortably close to each other. At first, there is amusement and perhaps flirtation. Later, there is anger and annoyance. We see the much taller Gillian attempt to dominate the situation by leaning in, and we see Taprogge hold her ground and stare him down. This shifting dynamic unfolds for 60 minutes, a unit of time also independently demarcated by a darkroom timer placed in the video gallery, which sounds an alarm whenever the time has elapsed. Adjacent to the timer and couple dyad, another looped video plays: a stop-action close up of an apple falling into longitudinal sections.

Like many artists, Nipper would rather discuss the constellation of inspirations sparking her ideas than any specific interpretations of *An Arrangement for the Architect* ..., preferring to keep the chain of associations open-ended. The title, she admits, is a coded reference to a past relationship, and she cites the concept of "intimate space" developed by Edward T. Hall to describe the emotionally charged zone—usually less than 1½ feet in North America—in which people embrace, touch, and whisper, usually with people known to them. She also mentions a 1975 film by Allan Kaprow entitled *Warm Ups*, in which performers exchange body heat. Nipper

worked for many years as an archivist for and maintained an ongoing dialogue with Kaprow. If the title is a clue to the content, it is possible that the work is a take on the sexual tension between Howard Roark and Dominique Francon in Ayn Rand's novel of architectural existentialism *The Fountainhead*. Certainly, the work is an allegory of the age-old tensions between man and woman that began with Adam and Eve—a symbolic possibility heightened by the inclusion of apple imagery. However, the Pavlovian element of the timer's buzzer and the lush red illumination undercut any straightforward interpretation by staging the work in the context of a photo laboratory. Nipper, who confesses to being fascinated with the experimental nature of photography, insists this work is above all a photographic image, something mechanically excerpted from the flow of life for the purpose of analysis. Watching a relationship gradually develop like a photographic print (think of the darkroom scenes in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blowup*) highlights the mysterious ways science and human nature can intersect.

The other photographic works in the exhibition are less easily parsed. The four color photographs in the series *Evergreen* show the same head-on view of a straw-green theatrical curtain. The first image depicts only the curtain; the second a technician setting up a microphone stand in front of the curtain; the third the curtain and the microphone stand; the fourth two microphone stands in front of the curtain. Nipper, who shot the work in an actual Los Angeles recording studio, says she asked the sound technician in the second image to set the stage for Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson to sing their duet "Evergreen" ("Love, soft as an easy chair/Love,



fresh as the morning air . . .") from the 1976 film *A Star Is Born*. This Conceptual clue colors the chronological narrative implied by the rudimentary stop-action animation of the series. A Zen-like count-down to curtain time, *Evergreen* captures those charged preliminary moments when artists and audiences summon their concentration. The work also is a reminder that all of Nipper's works are carefully constructed manifestations of predetermined ideas and sometimes inchoate systems.

The five color photographs making up *Love with the Sound Technician* function as a complement to *Evergreen*. The nearly identical images depict two boom microphones and a slowly melting Calder-style mobile made of wire and ice in the scruffy, black-painted corner of a recording studio. Nipper says *Love with the Sound Technician* illustrates the activity unfolding behind the curtain's serene pleats. The mobile, whose delicate equilibrium of balance will certainly be upset as its frozen pendants continue to melt, she suggests, is a stand-in for the sound technician, whom she in turn views as an everyman subject to the vicissitudes of time and change. Like *An Arrangement for the Architect . . .*, these two series can be viewed as emblems of yin and yang—of warm emotion and cool rationality, of harmony and chaos, of perfect potential and the imperfect present. But, to extend the Zen interpretation, there is an aspect of the *koan*, or enlightening riddle, in this and most of Nipper's work: the viewer must struggle through a degree of opacity (what's the sound of one hand clapping, or a sculpture melting?) to achieve a glimpse of deeper meaning.

Another version of the same frozen mobile in *Love with the*

Sound Technician appears against a blue background in the series of the three color photographs *Weather Center*, but these images are digital screen grabs from one channel of a multi-part video installation entitled *Bending Water into a Heart Shape* (2003), which included a dancer attempting to mimic the movements of a figure-skating Lutz jump in extreme slow motion. A high-tech inversion of Hippocrates' aphorism "ars longa, vita brevis/art is long, life is short," the work distends the explosive instantaneity of the Lutz into a protracted exercise in endurance and concentration and presents a mobile, a sculptural form usually intended to eternally ride the wind, as an evanescent object whose final movements will come from its own demise. Of course, isolated from the installation, these screen grabs cannot convey this context, and Nipper speaks of them abstractly in relation to "clock time" and the science of meteorology. She is fascinated by chaos theory and the idea that huge hurricanes are formed by the gradual accumulation of millions of tiny atmospheric events that influence and reinforce each other, implying that tiny losses of meltwater will eventually cause her mobile to collapse. A diptych of two photographs also entitled *Weather Center*, a small image of an electronic thermometer with input sockets marked "arm," "leg," "chest" and a large, black-and-white negative image of a woman's torso. The thermometer, set up to measure body surface temperature, perhaps as part of a biofeedback experiment, Nipper says, represents the external and the knowable, and the negative represents the internal and the immeasurable.

Certainly, Nipper's internal sphere is inextricable from her work. To listen to her is to realize here is a kind of butterfly effect at

work in her mind, in which one idea sparks another, and one story connects to another, as in her recent delight in the non-sequitur discovery that Rudolf Laban subscribed to some of Aleister Crowley's mystical theories. She continually constructs elaborate narratives to explain the links between disparate images and ideas, and this process spills over into the installation process, determining where works must be seen in relation to each other. When she discusses her imagery, it sometimes seems as if she invokes her manifold interests as a kind of magic circle to shield her work from interpretation. Nipper would rather talk around than about her work. At the same time it is clear that she continually sifts through aesthetic and philosophical concepts to find immutable truths and that her work is a sincere attempt to express them. Nipper talks about peeling back the layers of everyday life and about how "everything comes back to the cube, the cone, and the sphere," the basic building blocks of first-year art school still-lives and the physical world. Through a complex, highly personal process involving both amalgamation and distillation, she creates images and experiences that reveal telling patterns usually hidden in plain sight. Whether or not you choose to follow her down the rabbit hole of signification she offers, it is clear from her lucid, startlingly original images that Nipper has accomplished something difficult: to make art that is at once simpler and more complicated than real life. The crystalline moments depicted in this exhibition's photographs and video are inspired attempts to test hypotheses about the mysterious and beautiful structures underlying everyday life.