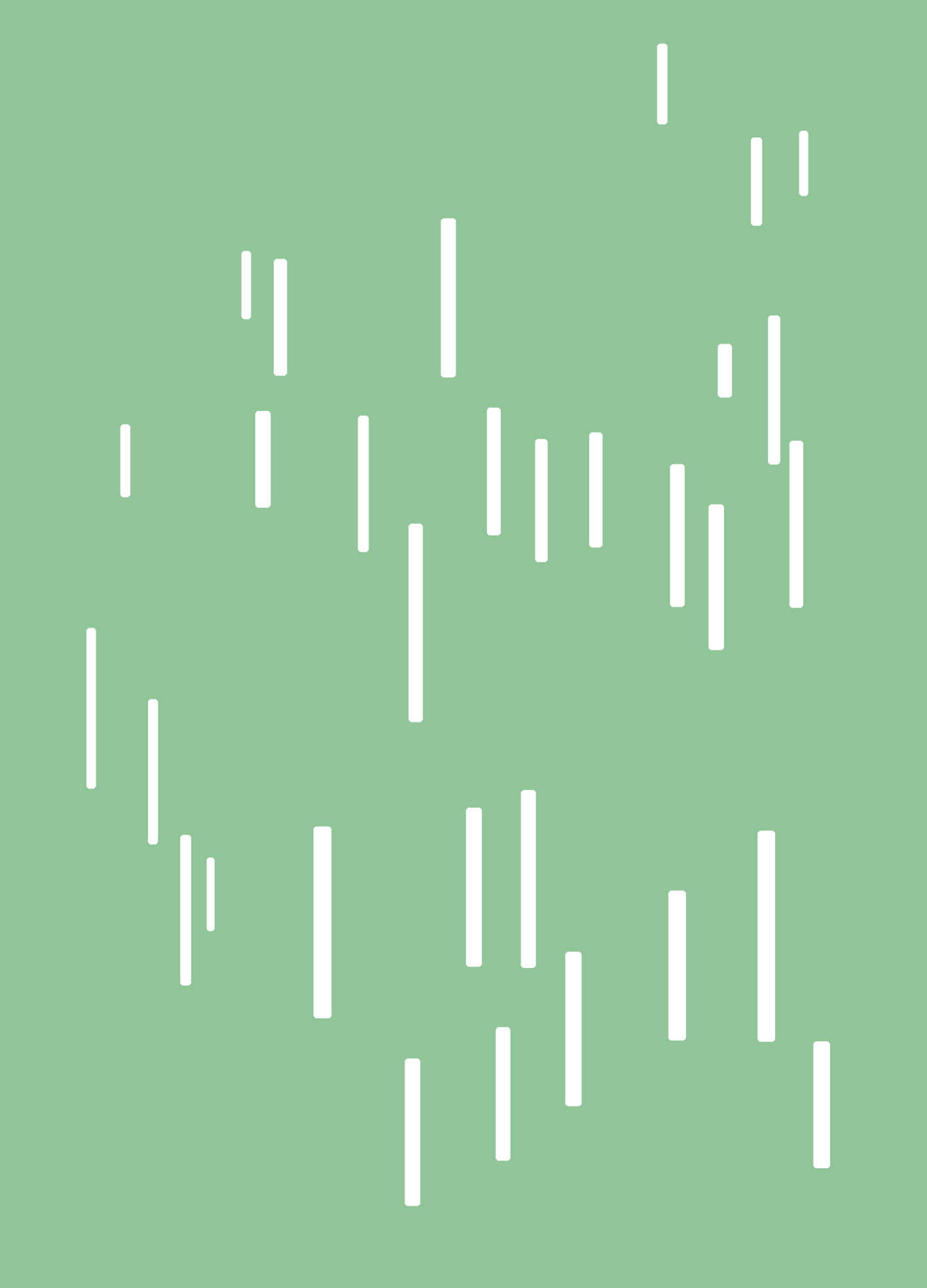
Tree Talk María Elena González



Tree Talk
María Elena González

Mills College Art Museum

With contributions by
Stephanie Hanor
Julia P. Herzberg
Marshall N. Price

This catalogue is published on the occasion of *María Elena González: Tree Talk*, an exhibition organized by Mills College Art Museum from January 23 through March 17, 2019 and curated by Stephanie Hanor.

The publication is supported by the generosity of The Jay DeFeo Foundation and Agnes Gund.

© 2019 the authors, artists, and Mills College Art Museum, 5000 MacArthur Boulevard, Oakland, California, 94613, www.mcam.mills.edu. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner without permission.

Editor: Stephanie Hanor
Publication Coordinator and Copy Editor: Jayna Swartzman-Brosky
Designer: John Borruso
Printer: Solstice Press

ISBN: 978-0-9854600-6-8
LLCN: 2019940931

All images courtesy of Phil Bond, unless noted:
Jaka Babnik: pp. 6–7, pp. 50–51
Eric W. Baumgartner: p. 8
Brendan Glasson: p. 22
María Elena González: pp. 32–39, p. 53
John Ivers: p. 12
National Gallery of Art: p. 10 right
Philipp Scholz Rittermann: p. 10 left

Contents

Tree Talk: From Physical to Acoustical

Stephanie Hanor

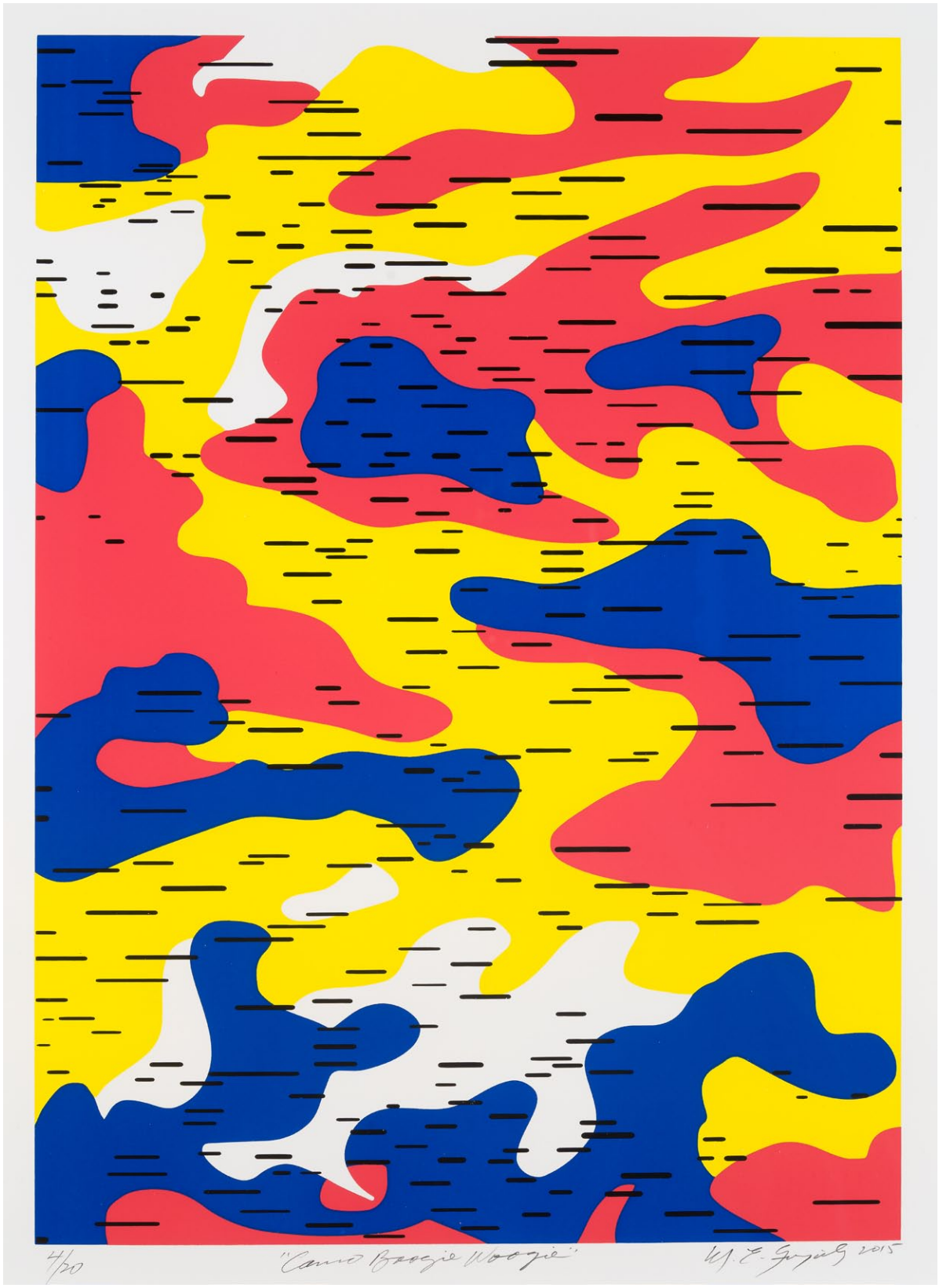
Over thirteen years in the making, María Elena González's expansive series *Tree Talk* explores the translation between the physical and the acoustical. Investigating the unexpected visual parallels between the bark of birch trees and cylindrical player piano rolls, the project demonstrates González's interest in experimental sound and composition, including sound as a sculptural material.

In 2005, as a resident faculty member at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, González started each day drinking coffee in one of two lounge chairs by Lake Wesserunsett. Surrounded by native birch trees, it was there that she made the formal connection between the cylindrical shape and unique black markings of the trees with the form of a piano roll and wondered how, if at all, she could hear the sound of a birch tree. Her video installation *Tempo* (2015), reflects this experience, which served as the starting point of her project. Positioned in front of the projector, two miniature chairs made of birch wood cast shadows on the projection of the serene lakeside location where her epiphany took place, the soulful cry of a loon occasionally punctuating the space. (fig. 1)

Before the summer term at Skowhegan ended, González had peeled off the bark of a felled tree and sent it back to her Brooklyn studio. Determined to translate the structure and surface of the bark into sound, she set herself the goal of bringing the tree back to life acoustically. Ultimately, her project would lead to working with three different birch trees, making visual transcriptions from each of their distinctive bark patterns to yield three distinct compositions for the player piano.

González began by flattening the bark into a gridded system, enabling her to become familiar with each tree's form and feel and distinctive

Fig. 1
Tempo, 2015
Video, wood, glass
Dimensions vary


4/20
"Camo Boogie Woogie"
W. E. Gajewski 2015

markings, known botanically as lenticels, which enable the tree to breathe. (fig. 28) The lenticels correspond to cuts in the player piano rolls that create sound through the pneumatic, or forced air, system of the player piano. In this way, González is creating an opportunity to hear the "breath" of each tree.

From the flattened birch bark, the artist created two-dimensional graphite frottages, or rubbings, which serve as the basis for the digital production of each player piano roll. The frottage prints are not merely tracings of the tree bark but were important in González's process of getting to know the structure of the bark. Over the course of the project, González created multiple frottage drawings for each tree, enhancing the tree's natural notation and structure through the addition of collaged elements.

Both the flattened bark and frottage drawings evoke maps and aerial landscapes—sections of which have been highlighted by the artist with ink and green vellum. (fig. 9) This heightens the temporal quality of the work—visually amplifying both the timespan of the tree's life as well as the tempo of González's resulting auditory experience. The artist captures the beauty and ephemerality of nature, inspiring viewers to contemplate what our natural world would say if we listened.

Similarly, her series of camouflage prints also play with strategies of mapping. Gonzalez superimposes a classic military camouflage pattern over a section of bark markings, overlaying color palettes that evoke different landscapes and even art historical references, such as Piet Mondrian's iconic painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (fig. 2) In doing so, the prints echo the way patterns in nature can be a source of concealment as well as revelation.

Tree Talk represents a shift from González's earlier large-scale sculptural installations informed by architecture and personal experience, including her Cuban-American heritage. Her earlier interactive sound works often combined elements of nature with Cuban references, such as *Mambo Mango* (1991), a seed-shaped floor sculpture made from rawhide and meant to be played like a conga drum, and *Black Bean Rain Sticks* (1992), in which she repurposed a staple of Cuban cuisine into a sound making device. Birch bark in *Tree Talk,* however, is used primarily as a visual reference to sound as opposed to a material that actually makes sound. Instead, González's numerous iterations and resulting drawings transform the bark into the final playable material of the piano roll. As demonstrated in *Tempo*, the entire *Tree Talk* project is still linked to González's personal experience and memory but is universal in its elegant investigation into the sound of nature.

Other artists have explored the idea of talking trees, including artist and songwriter Terry Allen. In *Trees* (1986), commissioned by the

Fig. 2
Camo (Boogie Woogie)
2015
Silkscreen
25 ¾ × 16 ½ in.

Fig. 3
Terry Allen, *Trees*, (detail)
1986
Stuart Collection
UC San Diego

Fig. 4
Roxy Paine, *Graft*
2008–2009
Stainless steel and concrete
Height: 540 in.
Gift of Victoria
and Roger Sant
National Gallery of Art
Washington, 2009.109.1

Stuart Collection at the University of California, San Diego, he remarks upon the continual loss of natural environment at the campus by salvaging three eucalyptus trees from a grove razed to make way for new buildings. (fig. 3) Two of these trees are preserved and encased in skins of lead. One emits a series of recorded songs and the other a sequence of poems and stories created and arranged specifically for the project. At the entrance to the library, the third tree of Allen's installation remains silent, perhaps as a reminder that trees must be cut down to print books. Other examples include Roxy Paine's large-scale stainless steel *dendroids*, tree-like forms that study growth patterns in nature. (fig. 4) Defined as anything branching, the term dendroid also references the structures of the human brain and nervous system, and thus Paine's sculptures become a metaphor for biological communication as a form of talking among plants.

González, on the other hand, is deconstructing the three-dimensional form of the tree using the internal structure of the tree's breathing apparatus as a score and the cylindrical shape of the tree as the impetus for the ultimate musical form. Her experimentation with sound and visual art resonates with the history of experimental music at Mills College. Removed from the tradition-bound cultural centers on the East Coast, the Bay Area has provided a fertile breeding ground of artistic innovation for well over a century. Among the institutions to provide a base for this creative ferment, Mills is internationally renowned for its commitment to experimentation and collaboration across the fine arts.

During the 1930s and 1940s, composers Henry Cowell, Lou Harrison, and John Cage taught at Mills. Together they forged an inclusive aesthetic attitude rooted in an openness to, and an active

search for, new sounds and musical forms—a unique, characteristically "American," musical identity recognized today as the experimentalist tradition. Cage and his colleagues questioned what they viewed as an arbitrary distinction between noise and so-called "musical" sounds. In the early 1940s, Cage spent a great deal of time writing letters and meeting with potential donors to discuss plans for a Center for Experimental Music that would create opportunities for musicians to collaborate with sound engineers in exploring musical uses for electronic sounds. Although Cage's efforts were unsuccessful, his dream finally did become a reality in the fall of 1966 when the San Francisco Tape Music Center moved to Mills, eventually becoming the Center for Contemporary Music (CCM).[1]

Perhaps most influential to the *Tree Talk* project is the work of Conlon Nancarrow, who was a visiting professor at Mills in 1985. Influenced by the musical innovations of Cowell and Cage, in 1939 Nancarrow began composing solely for the player piano. He is one of the first composers to use auto-playing musical instruments specifically for their potential to play extremely complex rhythmic patterns at a speed far beyond human ability. His early pieces are reminiscent of the harmonic and melodic structure of jazz pianists, while his later work became much more abstract, emancipating time from the physical constraints of the piano. González's three player piano rolls are very much in the spirit of Nancarrow's work. Notes cluster in dense groupings and also spread laterally across the rolls in ways that are technically impossible for one person to play. Through the automation of the player piano, each tree produces intricate melodic expressions that morph into pure abstraction.

Composers at CCM developed a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to electronic music fusing visual, theatrical, and musical elements. Their innovative work quickly placed Mills at the forefront of the rapidly growing field of electronic music led by a succession of electronic music pioneers who have served as its directors, including experimental composer Pauline Oliveros. Mills has long been on the cutting edge of new developments in contemporary music focused on exploring relationships between written composition and improvisation.

Building on this history, González worked with composers Marc Zollinger and John Ivers, both recent MFA students in Mills' music department, to develop live multi-instrumental interpretations of her tree drawings. In collaboration with González, the composers translated the visual, gestural, and topographic data found in the artist's drawings into improvisational scores performed in the museum. Zollinger and Ivers used two of González's 50-foot long drawings, *T2 #1* (2015) and *T3 #3 (Marc's Tree)* (2018), as graphic scores. (fig. 29, fig. 14)

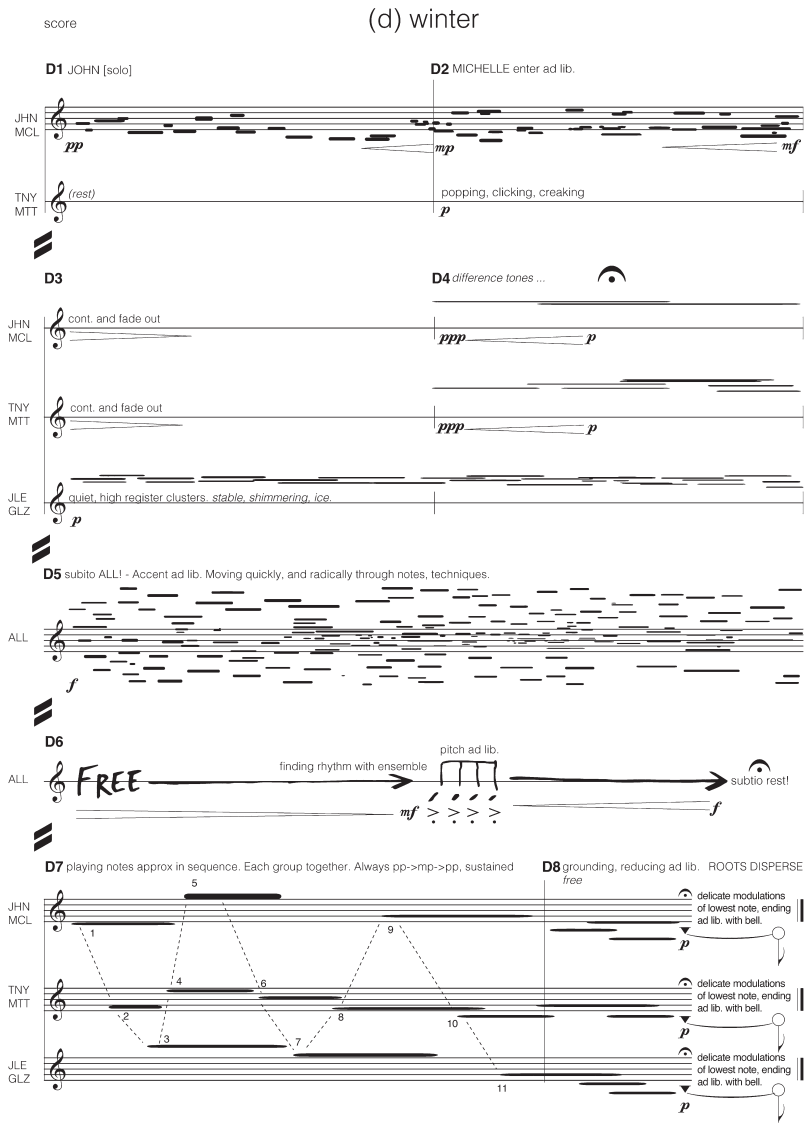


Fig. 5
John Ivers' notes for "winter" improvisation section of *T2 #1*

Each approached the visual material in a variety of ways, from strict graphical interpretations to differing conceptions of growth and time, as the ensembles traversed open and diverse notations.

T2 #1 was performed by the ensemble *Dirt and Copper* based on a structure composed by Ivers who split the drawing into four movements, each representing a season in the tree's life-cycle. In the opening movement (spring), the ensemble traversed the highest and youngest section of the tree. Invocations of wind and instability were voiced in tandem with youthful melodies derived from the tree rubbings. Movement two (summer) was highly energetic as performers branched into individual and idiomatic conversations with the tree. Movement three (fall) explored the more static, harmonic, and somber aspects of

Fig. 6
Performance documentation from *Variations on Impression* on February 6, 2019 featuring performances by *Dirt and Copper* led by John Ivers, and *Illuminated Grey Ensemble*, led by Marc Zollinger

the tree as it extends from canopy to trunk. Finally, movement four (winter) synthesized the fragile and piercing nature of ice with contours derived from the piano roll. (fig. 5)

Performed by *Illuminated Grey Ensemble*, Zollinger took a distinctly different approach to scoring *T3 #3 (Marc's Tree)*. While investigating González's process and listening to the sounds of the tree through the player piano, Zollinger conceived of hearing the tree in both vertical and lateral time. Using collage, he arranged his score to represent a multiplicity of time, structuring the tree in a triptych of three continuous movements. In the resulting score, the lines in the tree are overlaid both vertically and horizontally and sometimes the tree is upside down. Zollinger was also interested in hearing and representing the color of the tree, which is a white-grey. The electronic component of the performance represented this color and incorporated a time-stretched recording of the player piano roll *Skowhegan Birch #3,* which changes the speed of an audio signal by affecting its pitch. The other musicians in the ensemble used notes and passages from the same source material as guides for improvisation. (fig. 6)

Tree Talk served as a unique opportunity for the composers to work directly with a visual artist to generate experimental sound compositions. As González continues to reinvent and challenge the relationship between idea and material translation, the culmination of *Tree Talk* creates new and unexpected transformations of physical matter into acoustical form and nature into sound.

1 David Bernstein, "A Brief History of the Fine Arts at Mills College," *Experiments in the Fault Zone* (Oakland: Mills College Art Museum), 2013.


B41
B42

Sound Ecology: María Elena González's *Tree Talk Series*

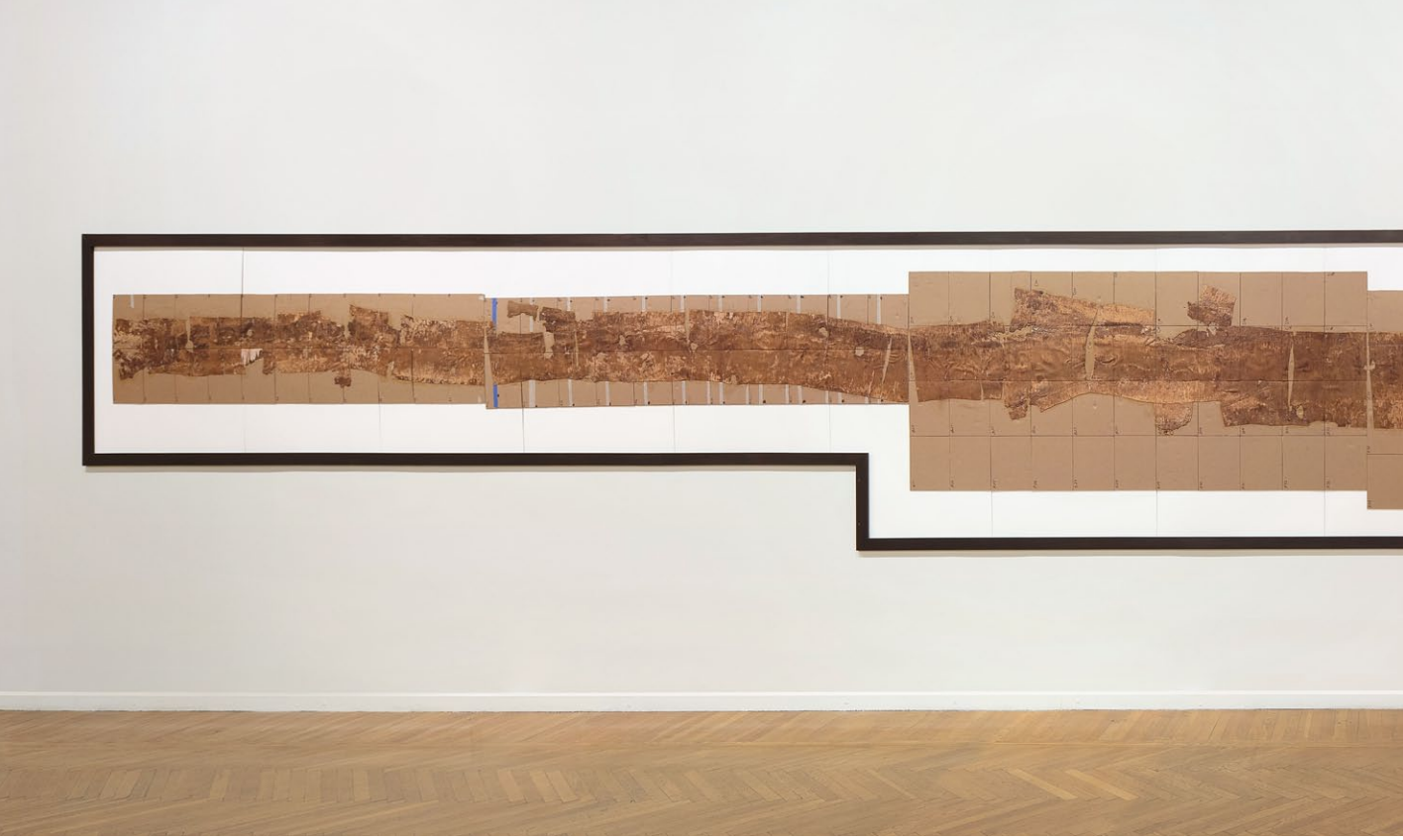
Marshall N. Price

Music, which should pulsate with life, needs new means of expression, and science alone can infuse it with youthful vigor.

—Edgard Varèse, 1917

Writing in the pages of Francis Picabia's Dada publication *391* over a century ago, composer Edgard Varèse called for a music that was, in essence, a liberation of "a whole new world of unexpected sounds, [that] will lend themselves to the experiences of my inner rhythm."[1] Emerging at a moment when art and technology were undergoing rapid and radical changes, Varèse's ideas inspired future artists to seek new and unconventional ways in which to unlock sound. Over the following decades, and with this same spirit of exploration, musical composers and sound artists found industrious ways in which to audibly transcribe, emulate, and interpret the natural world. John Cage's *4′33″*, a work of ostensible silence, first performed in the outdoor Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock, New York in 1952, eschews musical notes altogether and relies exclusively on the sounds of the surrounding environment to create the composition. In the late 1960s, revolutionary composer Pauline Oliveros used synthetic electro-psychedelic sounds to create a portrait of the natural world in *Alien Bog*. Several decades later, sound ecologist Hildegard Westerkamp collaged recordings of bird calls and other animal noises to create *Beneath the Forest Floor*, an evocative woodland soundscape.[2]

Fig. 7
T3 (Bark), detail, 2018
Birch bark, cardboard, tape, Sharpie, mounted on museum board
62 in. × 50 ft. 5 in.



Cuban-born sculptor and installation artist María Elena González shares with these artists a desire to transcend conventional sound composition and reveal a previously inaudible dimension of nature. For more than a decade this has been the catalyst for the artist's *Tree Talk Series*, a body of work that encourages the participant (and one does participate more than simply view these works) to consider anew the sounds of the natural world. Unlike Oliveros and Westerkamp, who heavily mediated nature in their works by making deliberate creative choices, González hews much more closely to the ideas of Cage, who sought to remove the artist's hand (and thus ego) from the creative process, and let nature speak for herself. This concept is at the heart of the *Tree Talk Series*.

The genesis of the series was born in a moment of synesthetic curiosity while the artist was a resident faculty member at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2005. After spending time surrounded by the birch trees on the banks of Lake Wesserunsett in central Maine, González questioned how we might better understand the information held within the architecture of the surrounding forest. Reflecting on the formal qualities of the birch bark, González wondered whether the dot-and-dash patterning distinctive of that species of tree could be transcribed into music. Could this ecological matrix, built on the collective history of evolution and nature's forward march of time,

Fig. 8
T3 (Bark), 2018
Birch bark, cardboard, tape, Sharpie, mounted on museum board
62 in. × 50 ft. 5 in.

be translated into an audible vocabulary? And if so, how would that sound? Would it reveal a harmonic corollary to the Jungian notion of the collective unconscious, and in turn, betray some deeply held natural memory of an ecological event or arboricultural experience?

The original raw tree bark pieces are key elements of González's installation and function in several different ways. As a type of ready-made object—an object that is repurposed and recontextualized by the artist—they provide a visual topography of, and studies for, the sound component of the series. In the early twentieth century, French Dada artist Marcel Duchamp presented a porcelain urinal, an industrial bottle rack, and a bicycle wheel as finished sculptures. For González, however, readymades are not objects manufactured by human hands; they are physical fragments of the natural world. This type of material exploration has long been a part of the artist's practice. Art historian Whitney Chadwick has noted that González's investigations are born out of a desire to expose "the points at which the physical, the psychological, and the emotional intersect."[3] In the *Tree Talk Series*, the two-dimensional works provide a physical point of departure, as well as a blueprint for the sound compositions.

The largest of these are two bark-based works, *T2 (Bark)* (fig. 28) and *T3 (Bark)* (fig. 8), and their corresponding frottages, *T2 #1* (fig. 29) and *T3 #3 (Marc's Tree)* (fig. 14). These, along with several smaller

bark works, *Bark framed #1* and *Bark framed #2* (fig. 10), offer the best visual entrée into the series. Appearing like raised-relief maps, they render the contours and markings of the trees in a cartographic way. They offer more than simply a visual topography, however, and appear before us as hieroglyphic documents displaying a type of botanical longhand awaiting translation. The panoramic format, reminiscent of Chinese scroll painting, suggests the passage of time, the metronomic cadence of a sweeping musical composition, or the rhythmic meter of an epic poem.[4] Both the bark works and the rubbings are metaphysical landscapes transcribed directly from nature.

The monumental bark works and frottages are complemented by numerous smaller prints and rubbings such as *T2 (52-54)* (fig. 9) and *T3 (9-12)*. These shorter passages, taken from a much larger whole, most clearly illustrate the translation from bark to sound. The artist combined printed sections of the patterns on green and grey vellum, indicating passages from the player piano rolls, and collaged them over areas of the tree rubbings from which they were made. These collaged works reveal the process of transcription from markings to sound and best illustrate Gonzalez's desire for a "direct translation" of the tree bark. On the surface, the smaller works appear to have the methodical rigidity of a Constructivist painting, but conceptually they share an affinity with Cage's desire to remove the artist's hand from the creation of a work of art and essentially let the work make itself.

Indeed, Cage declared in the early 1960s that "art is the imitation of nature in her manner of operation." He was not only drawing on ideas articulated by his predecessors in the field of metaphysics, such as the Indian philosopher and art historian Ananda Coomaswaramy, and the medieval theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas; he was attempting to illuminate an aspect of the creative process, allowing chance to determine any variety of one's artistic choices.[5] Cage believed that anthropocentric art and music was trivial and that nature itself, beyond any individual person, had an intrinsic expressivity found in elements such as trees, rocks, and water. A similar ethos pervades the *Tree Talk Series*.

The sound component of the series is comprised of three sculptures in the form of player piano rolls (fig. 12) transcribed directly from the dashes and dots found on the bark of birch trees. The resulting work is aleatoric—a composition created primarily by chance—and when played, the resulting music vacillates between brief moments of silence and long, cascading, polytonal phrases. But cacophony and dissonance become paradoxical concepts here

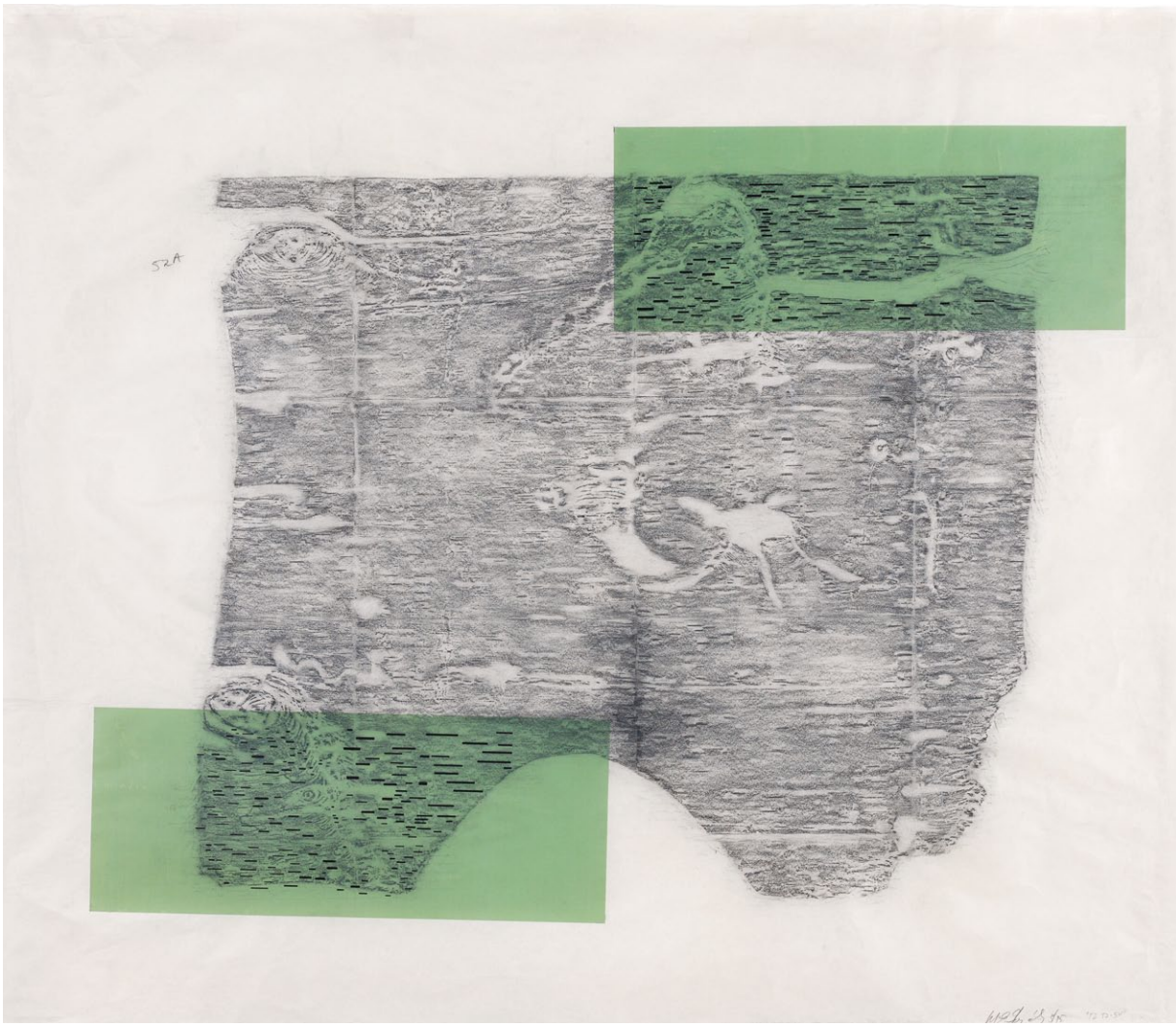


Fig. 9
T2 52-54, 2015
Graphite, ink jet on
vellum on Japanese paper
40 × 46 ½ in.

Fig. 10
Bark framed #1, 2012
Birch bark, Sharpie,
ink, cardboard
53 ½ × 47 in.

Bark framed #2, 2012
Birch bark, Sharpie,
ink, cardboard
56 ½ × 46 ½ in.

as a chorus of voices, held for centuries within the trees of the forest, are freed from their confines and finally speaks out all at once. Liberated from the constraints of the conventional elements of music such as time and key signatures, the *Skowhegan Birch* compositions are a symphony of sensorial effluence. The result is an emancipated cascade of collected sounds.

González intends for nature to speak for itself through the *Skowhegan Birch* compositions, acting as both composer and musician. This idea of a nature-driven instrument, free from human manipulation has precedence that can be traced back to the Aeolian harp of ancient Greece. Named for Aeolus, god of the wind, the instrument is activated by breezes that blow over its strings, creating a harmonic drone. Opened in 2005, the massive *Sea Organ* in Zadar, Croatia, is powered by the constant churning of the Adriatic Sea. Embedded in the stone and concrete of the town's quay, generating harmonics that crest and fall with the surging water, it is a musical instrument as well as an engineering and architectural achievement.[6] While the *Skowhegan Birch* compositions share some of the same traits as the music created by these instruments, for González, creating these works was less about harnessing the movement of nature to create a soundscape, and more about liberating a sonic experience from the natural world.

Cage believed that music could sober and quiet the mind, making it susceptible to divine influences and open to the fluency of things that come through our senses. Art, he proposed, could help us achieve this state. Rather than sober and quiet the mind, however, the *Skowhegan Birch* compositions animate, stimulate, and even confound the mind. We are conditioned to presume that sound art and musical compositions inspired by, or with direct references to nature should have the hallmarks of reassuringly familiar sounds, whether composed using woodwinds, strings, synthesizers, found sounds, or field recordings. The Baroque melodies of Antonio Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, the orchestral tone poems of Otto Respighi's *Pines of Rome*, or the humming and buzzing of recorded animal sounds in Henning Christensen's experimental Fluxus work *Symphony Natura Op. 170*, all of these compositions carry with them a timbre and rhythm that we recognize either as melody and harmony, time or key signatures, or discernable sounds from nature. González's disquieting compositions upend that reassuring sense of the familiar and insist upon a deeper engagement from its audience.

Tempo (fig. 1), an installation comprised of a single channel video projection with sculpture, transports us to the banks of Lake Wesserunsett introduces us to the environment that provided inspiration for the *Tree Talk Series*. We peer out through the trees onto

Fig. 11
María Elena González performing *Skowhegan Birch #1*, Mills College Art Museum, March 6, 2019

the lake as the wind rustles the tree branches, and we can hear the lapping of water and an occasional bird call. The chairs are miniature replicas of Gerrit Rietveld's famous *Red and Blue Chair* (here rendered in unfinished birch), made by the artist from Maine birch wood. Positioned to cast life-size shadows onto the projection, they welcome the participant to listen to the sounds of the forest. Indeed, the halcyon scene requests a meditative response. In many ways, *Tempo* encapsulates the fundamental character of the entire series; In addition to providing a sensorial preface to the artist's inspiration, it also provides a contemplative coda.

For anyone who has spent time in nature, sound is an intrinsic part of the landscape. When we go outdoors, we instinctively know that we will hear certain things: birds, wind, trees rustling, etc. Artists and acoustic ecologists have long used recordings of these sounds in their works. Collaged together in an infinite variety of ways, these soundscapes provide us with a subjective auditory snapshot of place. What the *Tree Talk Series* reveals to us is that there are other dimensions of sound in the natural world. Varèse referred to his music as "organized sound" and identified himself, not as a musician, but as a "worker in rhythms, frequencies, and intensities."[7] The French composer was in opposition to strict categorical definitions, and González works with a similar exploratory ethos, encouraging the viewer to consider the landscape from an entirely new perspective. The *Tree Talk Series* unlocks a collective history and gives a sonorous voice and audible consciousness to the rural Maine landscape. Whether we perceive María Elena González's work through the lens of musical or soundscape composition,

acoustic ecology, sound art, installation art, visual art, or any combination of those things (any and all are valid readings), it remains, in the end, an inquiry into the architecture of the natural world and a moving and poignant aesthetic experience.

1 Quoted in, Edgard Varèse and Chou Wen-chung, "The Liberation of Sound," *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Autumn–Winter, 1966): 11.

2 Thanks to Mark Pearson for our conversations regarding experimental music and soundscapes. Denise Von Glahn, *Music and the Skillful Listener: American Women Compose the Natural World Music, Nature, Place* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), 111 et passim. Also see Frédérick Duhautpas and Makis Solomos, "Hildegard Westerkamp and the Ecology of Sound as Experience. Notes on *Beneath the Forest Floor*," *Journal of Acoustic Ecology* 13 (2014): 6–9.

3 Whitney Chadwick, *María Elena González: Suspension*. Exh. cat. (New York: Knoedler & Company, 2008), 5–6.

4 The panoramic rubbings served as inspiration for musical compositions by Marc Zollinger and John Ivers, *Tree Talk: Variations on Impressions,* which premiered at the Mills College Art Museum February 6, 2019.

5 You Naki, "How to Imitate Nature in Her Manner of Operation: Between What John Cage Did and What He Said He Did," *Perspectives of New Music* 52 (Autumn 2014), 144.

6 Alan Licht, *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories*. (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 76. For the *Sea Organ* see https://www.zadar.travel/en/city-guide/attractions/19-04-2007/sea-organ#.XIPblC3Mzrc. Accessed March 9, 2019.

7 Edgard Varèse and Chou Wen-chung, "The Liberation of Sound," 18.

FOLLOWING PAGES

Fig. 12
Skowhegan Birch #1 2005–2012, *Skowhegan Birch #2,* 2012–2015 and *Skowhegan Birch #3* 2016–2018
Player piano rolls
Dimensions vary

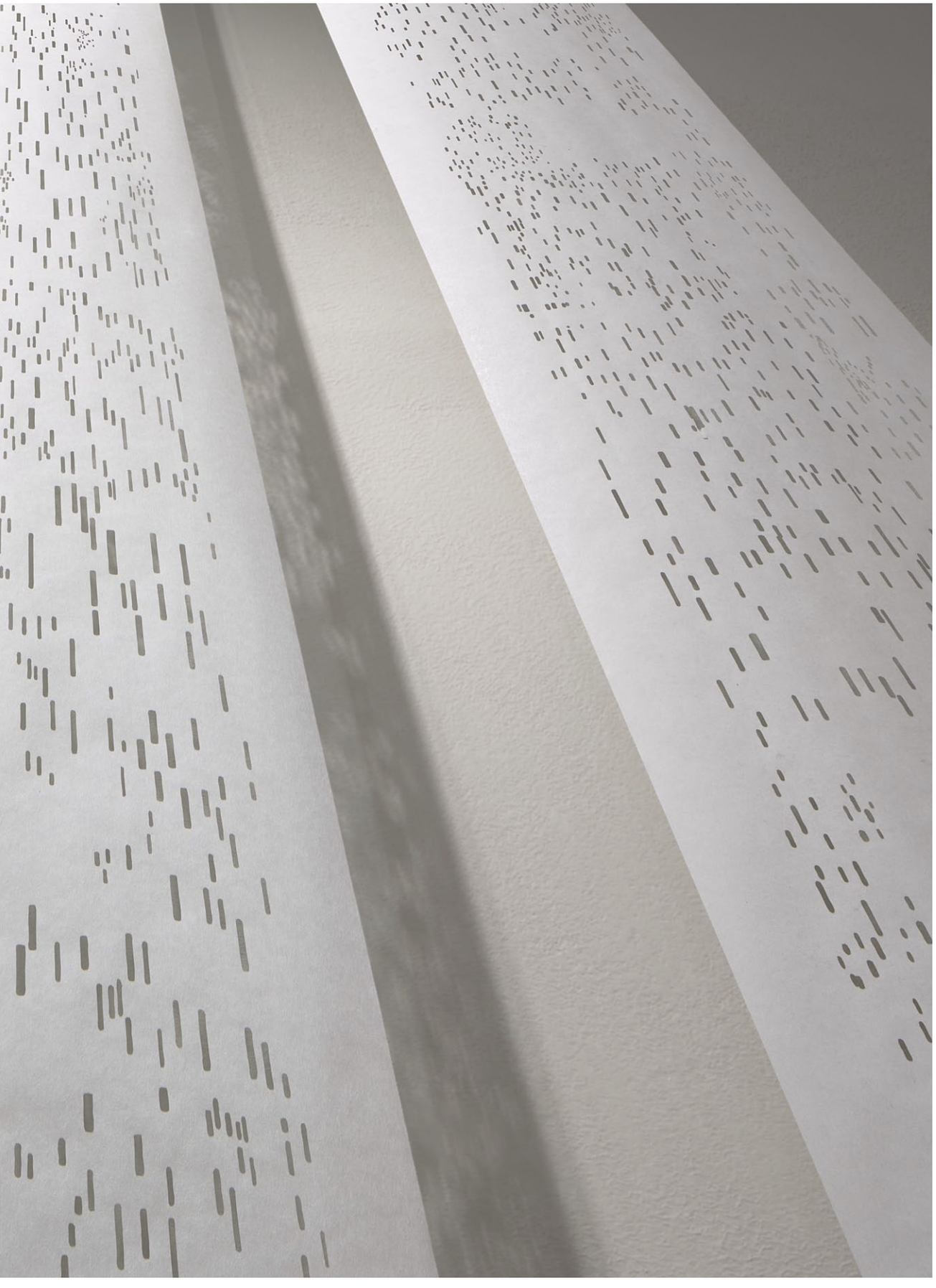
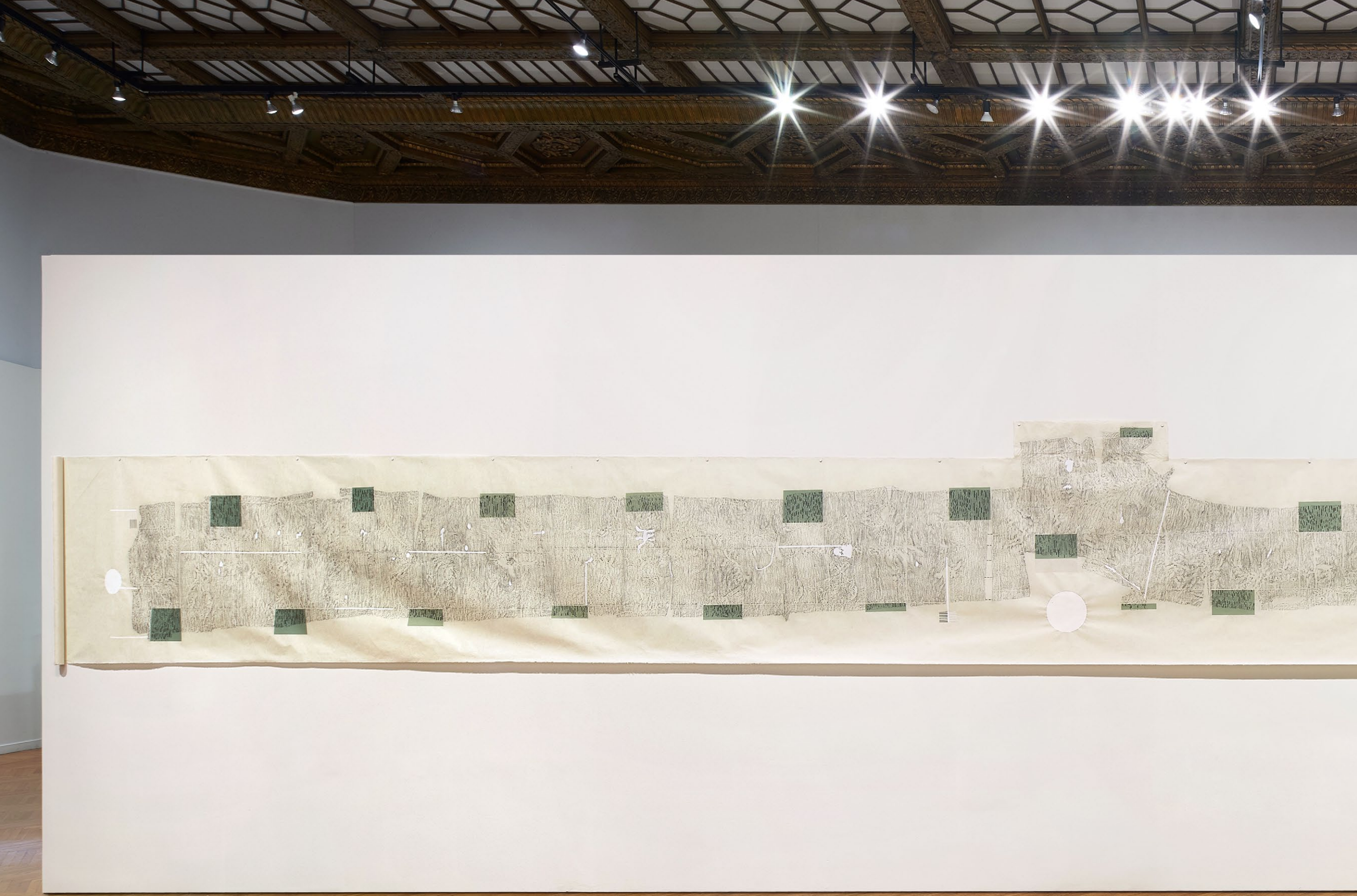


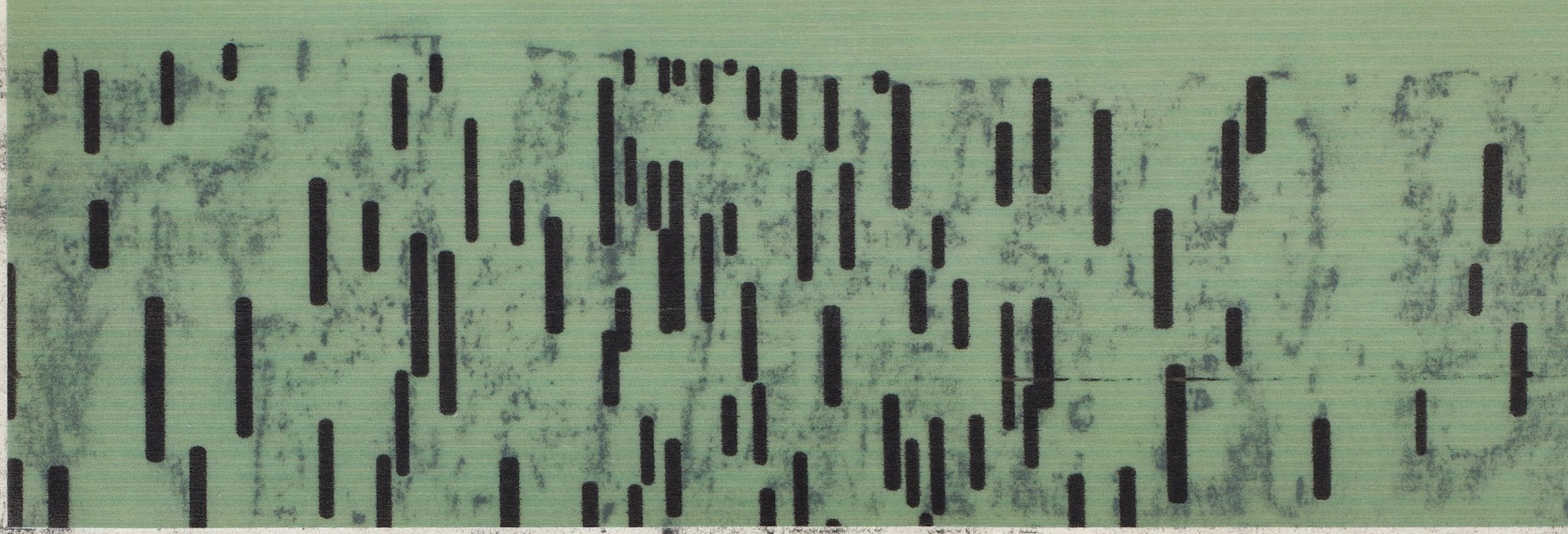
Fig. 13
Tree Steps 1, 2005
Digital print, graphite
on Bhutanese paper
14 × 8 ½ in.

FOLLOWING PAGES

Fig. 14
T3#3 (Marc's Tree), 2018
Graphite, Sharpie,
gouache, ink jet on vellum
40 in. × 53 ft.

Fig. 15
T3#3 (Marc's Tree) detail,
2018
Graphite, Sharpie,
gouache, ink jet on vellum
40 in. × 53 ft.






A49
T2 B49
T2 B50
T2 C50
T2 C51

A Conversation with María Elena González: A Trajectory of Sound

Julia P. Herzberg

In 2014, I engaged in a series of dialogues with María Elena González about her work on the Tree Talk Series. *At the time, González was completing* Skowhegan Birch #2, *the second of her birch bark inspired player piano rolls, which would premier at the 30th Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana in Slovenia. During my visits to her studio, the artist and I discussed her experiments with sound sculpture and her ambitions for the* Tree Talk Series. *Our original exchange was included in the catalog essay for the* Tree Talk *exhibition at the 31st Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana. It is republished here in full with an addendum.*

•

I first saw *Skowhegan Birch #1*, the player piano roll made from the pattern on birch bark, at MAD (Museum of Arts and Design), in the summer of 2013, not long before the work was awarded the Grand Prize at the 30th Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana. By all standards, it was an amazing work, as were the accompanying works on paper and framed bark pieces. The following year, I visited María Elena González' studio, several times, to talk about her work on the *Tree Talk Series*. For the catalogue essay of the *Tree Talks Series* exhibition in the Ljubljana Biennial, González thought it would be revealing to talk about the development of sound in her sculpture that began in 1989 and continues intermittently to the present.[1]

Fig. 16
T2 (Bark), detail, 2015
Birch bark, cardboard, tape, Sharpie, mounted on museum board
5 ft. 11 in. × 41 ft. 5 in.

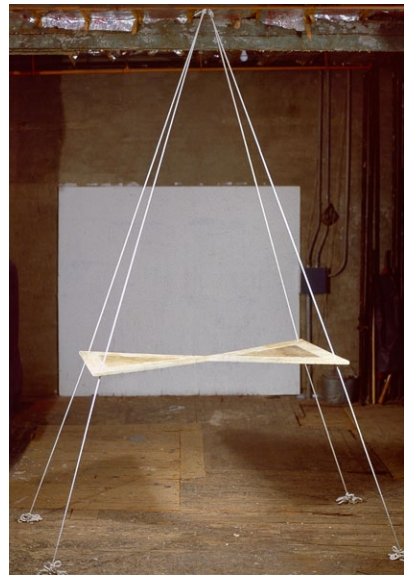


Fig. 17
T for Two, 1989
Wood, rawhide, graphite, chalk, and lacquer
30 ½ × 40 ½ × 20 in.

Fig. 18
Untitled, 1989
Wood, rawhide, and rope
12 × 7 × 4 ft.

Since the artist's experimental nature of sound has not been previously written about or published until now, it is our expectation that this conversation will broaden an understanding of sound, a carefully and conscientiously conceived element, which eventually exploded into music in *Skowhegan Birch #1* (2005–2012) and *Skowhegan Birch #2* (2012–2014).

EARLY CONVERSATION

JULIA P. HERZBERG: Let's talk about the work chronologically with an eye to your material and conceptual processes. And when we conclude, we will have drawn a fuller picture of how and why sound eventually became music and why music, so central to your very being, was so unusually created in some of your work between 1989 and 2014. Let's begin with *T for Two* (1989), the first work that has sound. (fig. 17)

MARÍA ELENA GONZÁLEZ: *T for Two* is a furniture-object-sculpture in the shape of a small stepladder. There are two steps on either side with different graphic markings indicating a place for one's knees and bottom. I thought of constructing the stepladder so that one or two people could kneel on the first step and/or sit on the second step; in either case, they would face each other. Then they could become actively involved with the piece and tap the rawhide insets on the top. The rectangular rawhide insets serve as drums. As you know, rawhide is a principal material used to make drums, and in Cuban music, in percussion, rawhide reigns supreme. Drums, gongs, and maracas are all percussion.

Fig. 19
Rotunda, detail, 1990
Wood, wood putty, lacquer, rawhide, and rope
12 × 3 × 3 ft.

JPH: What inspired you to title the work after Ella Fitzgerald's famous song "Tea for Two," even though the spelling is somewhat different?

MEG: I grew up listening to music pretty much everyday and still listen to music all the time. Since the mid-1980s, I have mostly listened to jazz in my studio—I must have been in an Ella Fitzgerald phase. As far as the spelling is concerned, 'T' has a structural, architectural look to it; playing with language is a result of bilingualism.

JPH: Immediately following *T for Two*, you began working with rawhide, wood, and rope, materials used in *Untitled* (1989) and *Rotunda* (1990), which I included in *Installations: Current Directions* at the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art (MoCHA) in New York in 1990, and in two other similar sound sculptures at that time. (figs. 18 and 19) All of these were intended to include sound and be interactive. Would you elaborate on their production, and their anticipated presence in an exhibition venue?

MEG: At the time I made these rawhide sculptures, I was not only interested in having sound emanate from the works but equally in having the viewer physically interact with the sculptures to get involved with the pieces. I was tired of seeing viewers in the gallery just looking at the work without ever touching it. I wanted people to touch the rawhide in the sculptures, to get involved in their spatial dimensions, and to be accountable for the sound they were making. Even though the viewers were not going to play a symphony, they could still touch the rawhide and strike up a beat, just as in *T for Two*. Allowing for that kind of engagement through sculpture was a huge leap for me.

JPH: *Untitled* and *Rotunda* were attached to the floor and the ceiling by rope that alluded to the strings of musical instruments.

MEG: Exactly. The tensioned rope alludes to strings, suggesting a strong visual association to musical instruments. And, as I have said, the rawhide insets were intended for people to play on them. The only thing I didn't do was provide a pair of drumsticks!

JPH: *Rotunda* actually has a more pronounced drum-like shape.

MEG: Well, the stringing part is similar but not the shape. *Rotunda* is the perfect circle with a beautiful gradation of surface. I feel it has a very sensuous curve, and its finish is not unlike the wood on congas.[2]

JPH: At the same time you were making *Rotunda*, you were also making sculptures using rawhide but without sound. Then you made *Pod* and *Mambo Mango*, which had sound, and were placed on the floor, and were intended to be played like drums. The sculptures are formal departures from the work discussed above. Let's talk about these. (figs. 20 and 21)

MEG: I began working with ideas I thought were clear, but actually I was working toward something that was not immediately apparent. Fortunately I like being lost because that feeling is what thrills me about making art, finding my way to something new, which is just what happened when I made *Pod* (January) and *Mambo Mango* (July). Both pieces are based on nature's forms—pods and seeds. I made a lot of drawings and some prints of these shapes both before and during the time I made these two sculptures. *Mambo Mango* references both tropical fruit and tropical dance. I also made a wall piece based on reading *Mambo Kings Sing Songs of Love*, a work I still have. In looking back, I feel that *Pod* and *Mambo Mango,* as well as the other works mentioned, were important for their inclusion of sound and because they gave agency to viewers.

JPH: *Pod* and *Mambo Mango* are hollow cones that appear to be illuminated from within. Am I correct?

MEG: Yes. They are made with thin segments of transparent rawhide so that light appears to emanate from them. I started working with the rawhide because of the sound and its relationship to congas and making sound as music. But as a sculptor, when you start working with materials, you start noticing their properties, and one of the fantastic things about a particular type of rawhide is its translucency

Fig. 20
Pod, 1991
Wood, wood putty, graphite, lacquer, and rawhide
22 × 48 × 22 in.

Fig. 21
Mambo Mango, 1991
Wood and rawhide
21 × 52 × 21 in.

and luminosity. Because of the thinness of the rawhide, these pods seem to transmit light from within. The ability to achieve that kind of luminosity represented another creative leap for me.

JPH: *Black Bean Rain Sticks* were inspired by rain sticks, objects in the shape of a long hollow tube filled with small stones or beans. When turned upside down, the small stones or pebbles make a sound similar to rushing water or rain. How did you make this small percussion instrument? (fig. 22)

MEG: Again I used rawhide to make the cylinders. Using a drill bit, I made holes so that I could insert thin bamboo rods to interrupt the flow of the black beans in order to create sound. The black dots that appear on the outside, at the ends of the pieces of bamboo rods, are accentuated with a dark epoxy that holds the rods in place and incidentally creates a graphic surface pattern. When the cylinders were closed at either end, I put lead caps on them, much like one would do with a precious container.

JPH: Actually, *Black Bean Rain Sticks* is a very elaborative piece despite the simplicity of the two elongated tubular shapes.

MEG: You have pointed out something quite relevant, which is the cylindrical shape of this sculpture. So, where am I now: a player piano roll (*Skowhegan Birch #2*), which is a cylinder. And where does the music come from? The birch tree, another cylinder, which has marks that are translated to sound.

Fig. 22
Black Bean Rain Sticks, 1992
Wood, rawhide, lead,
epoxy, and black beans
32 ½ × 11 × 5 in.
Collection Roger Mayou,
Geneva

Fig. 23
Untitled (Circle), 1994
Metal leaf, wood,
metal, and rawhide
26 in. diameter × 3 in. deep
Collection Patricia Phelps
de Cisneros, New York

JPH: Your choice of black beans is self-referential. It speaks to Cuba.

MEG: Black beans are a basic food in that country and in other parts of the Caribbean for that matter. I consciously used them because of their relationship, like the drum, to my background. My work is not overt in the sense that it is branded: "I am Cuban." But I have my own way of speaking about my heritage, about where I come from in my artwork.

JPH: For *Untitled* (*Circle*), a work you did two years after *Black Bean Rain Sticks*, you continued using wood and rawhide but you added metal leaf and metal. (fig. 23) There is a great deal of luminosity in this sculpture as there was in *Pod* and *Mambo Mango*. And, similar to those works, *Untitled* (*Circle*) has a very tactile quality; it, too, can be touched.

MEG: This goes back to what I was saying about how I continued to discover the amazing qualities of rawhide—one: its translucency, another: its ability to project light. This particular piece makes me think of the word 'oh' because it reminds me of the shape my mouth makes when I say that word. So, that is how I refer to it even though it is not the official title. I had discovered that different rawhides have different densities and tones. For *Untitled* (*Circle*), I selected a particularly thin rawhide that was colorless rather than amber. The rawhide used for drums has an opaque amber quality whereas the rawhide used for *Untitled* (*Circle*) is the most clear. The background is a piece of wood that is gilded with a silver-like metal leaf to create a reflective surface

that allows the light to come in and bounce back out. The rawhide really lights up in a very ethereal, even magical, way.

JPH: You talked about the possibility of doing a public artwork, for which you have a very distinguished record, in the form of a labyrinth. How did these individual sculptures of ear labyrinths evolve? (fig. 24)

MEG: When I was doing a residency at Eternit AG in Payerne, Switzerland in 2001, I worked with fiber cement. I experimented with the possibilities inherent in that material, one that depends on its density to absorb and to carry sound. I became really interested in the idea of a public art piece where the viewers would hear bits and pieces of conversations as they walked through the labyrinth. With those ideas in mind, I started envisioning an acoustical labyrinth as a public art piece where you could talk to the wall in one part of the labyrinth and someone else would hear you in another part. The work I envisioned was not about getting lost inside; it was about being lost in a cacophony of fragmented conversation.

JPH: How and where did you make these pieces that form the maquette?

MEG: I made several maquettes at Eternit. During the time I sculpted these, I also made many drawings of labyrinths. If I had the opportunity to do a labyrinth as a public art work I would make it out of either fiber cement or cast cement.

JPH: As a public artwork, would the sound bounce back and travel so that the people in different parts of the space could hear one another?

MEG: I believe so. However, I would have to do a lot of research to get the results in order to fabricate the labyrinth correctly. Were I able to secure funding, it would be a matter of testing what works and what does not.

JPH: Your short video *Fountain Fest* (2011) is very light-hearted and whimsical. (fig. 25) It presents about twenty to twenty-four individually created fountains bearing names such as *Wally*, *Ambilic, Saint Sebastian, Balzac*, *Wonderland*, *Raupen*, and so forth. The fountains are made from ordinary buckets with electrical cords for the water pumps. Tell us about this most unusual grouping of sculptures, each one made from a little of this, that, and the other.

MEG: During a two-year period from 2009 to 2010, I made these fountains from recycled PVC buckets left over from a body of work I had just finished, my solo exhibition *Suspension* (2008), for which I made molds and cast them in Aqua-Resin. The process was tedious; it demanded precision and lots of planning. So when I finished that work,

Fig. 24
Ear Labyrinth Maquette
2001
fiber cement
approximately 1.2 × 14 × 10 in.

I felt I needed to do something spontaneous and relatively unstructured. It turned out to be such fun and so liberating to create the fountains from the leftover buckets and hardware I had on hand. I also liked the idea of recycling the buckets because I do not like wasting materials. Being frugal with my materials comes from my Cuban background where I had to make do with little, so I learned to create with few means. Over time, making do with little became part of my mindset.

JPH: Let me ask a couple of technical questions. How did you create a water pump that recycles the water?

MEG: The fountains are self-contained. The water falls back into the buckets. Since this project was about recycling and being self-contained each of the fountains has a certain amount of water that is constantly recycled. I used a pump similar to one used in a small fish tank. The spigots in each fountain regulate the flow of water, making some stream really fast, some trickle, and some have just a barely visible but steady flow. As you saw in the video, when all the fountains are arranged in close proximity and run simultaneously it's like hearing a symphony.

JPH: How did you create figures that seem personified? (fig. 26)

MEG: I used expandable foam and parts of things I had in my studio. Their personifications are related to personal and private associations, some of which come from my studies of art history.

JPH: Were these ever shown anywhere?

Fig. 25
Fountain Fest, 2011
Recycled PVC buckets, copper, rubber, water pumps, and water, 20 to 24 fountain-sculptures
dimensions variable

Fig. 26
Raupen (from *Fountain Fest*), 2009, recycled PVC buckets, plastic, copper, electric water pump, wood, hardware, and water
24 in. high × 12 in. diameter

MEG: No, they were not formally shown in a gallery. I showed them to a few individuals in my studio. Most of the fountains are destroyed, but I kept about four or five of them.

JPH: Given that you are premiering *Skowhegan Birch #2* in *Tree Talk Series*, let's end by reflecting on *Skowhegan Birch #1*, for which you received the Grand Prize at the 30th Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana in 2013.

MEG: *Skowhegan Birch #1* is a player piano roll, played by a pianolist on a player piano. *Skowhegan Birch #2* will premiere in this exhibition, *Tree Talk Series*, and now I am ready to begin work on *Skowhegan Birch #3*. From my view, *Tree Talk Series* will conclude when the three player piano rolls are played simultaneously so that the listeners will hear a forest. Although there may be more than one way to accomplish this, I envision having the three piano rolls individually transcribed into sheet music that would be played by pianists on standard pianos. I would need at least two pianos per roll because of the number of notes on each composition. Accordingly, I imagine six pianos playing *Skowhegan Birch #1, #2,* and *#3* simultaneously in a music hall. And that will be the end of *Tree Talk* series. I have a couple more years to go with this. (MEG laughs.)

2019 CONVERSATION CONTINUED

Since the publication of the initial interview, María Elena González has completed the third and final birch bark player piano roll. The exhibition of all three trees together at Mills College Art Museum (MCAM),

marks the culmination of the *Tree Talk Series*, including the artist's vision of seeing the birch bark compositions performed live. The evolution of this ten-year project proposes new questions about the artist's process and the relationship between sounds and form. On the occasion of the *Tree Talk* exhibition at MCAM, González and I continued our conversation from 2014 to get a sense of how a project of this scale matures and engages with sound and music so much more than I had ever anticipated.

JPH: We ended our last conversation shortly before the opening of your solo show in the 31st Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana. *Skowhegan Birch #2* had been completed and played in concert prior to the opening. Video documentation of that performance was included in the exhibition. Now that you have completed *Skowhegan Birch #3*, concluding the *Tree Talk Series* for the exhibition at MCAM, it is a great opportunity for us to return to our talk about sound in your work.

MEG: Indeed, it has been quite a journey through the *Skowhegan Birches*! This last one, *#3*, was particularly challenging, principally because of its size—it is the largest of the three trees and more than eight feet taller than *#2*. This adds visually to the cartography of the bark pieces or modules, and also to the sheer amount of notes and length of the acoustic piece.

JPH: Will you elaborate on the process of making the *Skowhegan Birches* from fallen trees?

MEG: Once I found the fallen tree in Skowhegan, I peeled the bark, numbered the different sections of the bark sequentially, brought them all back to my studio, cleaned and flattened them, and glued them to cardboard segments with the interior of the bark facing out. This was the preparatory process that enabled the production of the player piano rolls.

JPH: Originally you thought that when *Skowhegan Birch #3* was completed you would have the three piano rolls individually transcribed into sheet music that would be played by pianists on standard pianos. You anticipated needing at least two pianos per roll because of the number of notes in each composition; so six pianos could simultaneously play *Skowhegan Birch #1, #2,* and *#3* in a music hall. When did you become aware that the piano performance would not be realized as you had originally envisioned? How did you arrive at a collaboration for an interpretive program with composers John Ivers and Marc Zollinger?

Fig. 27
Marc Zollinger's notes for members of *Illuminated Grey Ensemble*

MEG: In a way, I still plan to hear *Skowhegan Birch #1, #2,* and *#3* played on conventional pianos. However, the process of transcribing the piano rolls to sheet music, organizing so many pianos and pianists requires extensive resources and time. I had expressed my ideas regarding a piano concert to Stephanie Hanor because I was aware of the amazing history of Mills College's experimental Center for Contemporary Music and Pauline Oliveros' work there. Oliveros' approach to "deep listening" is well known. Stephanie reached out to the College's music department, which put a call out to graduate students about my project. John Ivers and Marc Zollinger, two professional musicians and MFA students, responded. In our initial discussions we talked about sound, composing, interpreting, chance, visuals, and acoustics. We also spoke about Earl Brown's graphic scores, David Tudor's interpretations, and John Cage's work, among other composers. Ivers asked me why I wanted conventional pianos playing sounds that already existed through the player piano. That was a great question, so I responded that I was open to other ways of using the marks for interpretation. At that point we decided to schedule studio visits, so Ivers and Zollinger could see my process and how my project had developed. After they visited my studio, we discussed the next steps and decided that each composer would play my collages as graphic scores. Some weeks later, in September I think, we all met in the museum's print storage room to determine who would play which "tree." Thus, Ivers' interpretation is based on my *T2 #1* collage and Zollinger's on my *T3 #3* (*Marc's Tree*) collage. We worked together in a very organic way. It was truly a collaborative experience in the sense that our ideas flowed without

interfering with the expressive, cross-disciplinary nature of our individual work.

JPH: The composers performed their unique scores with their ensembles in the museum beside the corresponding tree drawings, which were separated in the middle of the gallery by a partition wall. Ivers' ensemble, *Dirt and Copper*, performed positioned between *T2 #1*, the rubbing with graphic notation, and *T2* (*Bark*), the original raw birch bark. *Illuminated Grey Ensemble*, led by Zollinger, performed surrounded by *T3* (*Bark*) and *T3 #3* (*Marc's Tree*). How did you personally feel as you looked at your work while listening to the musicians interpret your drawings? How did you react to the percussion instruments that have so often been part of your work?

MEG: I kept looking at the drawings on the walls, every so often, to see what I was hearing! It was a most exhilarating experience. Early on we all agreed on how important it would be for all of us, including the audience, to sit in proximity to the visual works that we were listening to. It was as if one could follow the bouncing ball, like the one that used to bounce over the lyrics on televised sing-alongs, but not quite that literal. The musicians integrated the different instruments within their ensembles fluidly; only during the instrumental solos were their individual sounds discernible. I found the pieces transporting and riveting. (fig. 6)

JPH: When listening to the two programs by Ivers and Zollinger—both experimental composers—I imagine you were quite thrilled to hear the musicians improvise. I might add that improvisation, as you noted earlier in reference to Ella Fitzgerald, together with a sense of indeterminacy, basic to the legacy of John Cage and the Judson Dance Theater group, are qualities that you have always admired and worked with in your practice. Am I on point?

MEG: Yes, you are right on. I attended rehearsals for both of the pieces. During our conversations, each composer addressed different aspects of my process and made their own observations of the trees (the bark, physical properties, and so forth). It was astonishing to hear the full performances. For example, diverse wind instruments musically articulated the relationship between the birches' lenticels, which are the trees' breathing apertures, and the cuts on the player piano rolls, which let air through the player piano's tracker bar to activate the piano keys. The percussive sounds in both ensembles were unfamiliar but alluring; the sounds were not all made with traditional

FOLLOWING PAGES

Fig. 28
T2 (Bark), 2015
Birch bark, cardboard, tape, Sharpie, mounted on museum board
5 ft. 11 in. × 41 ft. 5 in.

Fig. 29
T2 #1, 2018
Graphite, ink jet on vellum
40 in. × 45 ft.

Fig. 30
T2 #1, detail, 2018
Graphite, ink jet on vellum
40 in. × 45 ft.

musical instruments. The musicians' solos were improvisational voices that gave the moment unexpected acoustical movements. We are still reeling from their performances.

JPH: Do you have any special feelings you would like to riff on?

MEG: This is one of the richest projects I have ever worked on. It is so generous and vast in scope. It is ever growing—another layer or possibility keeps revealing itself. I am not sure I will ever work on an idea or a project of this scale again.

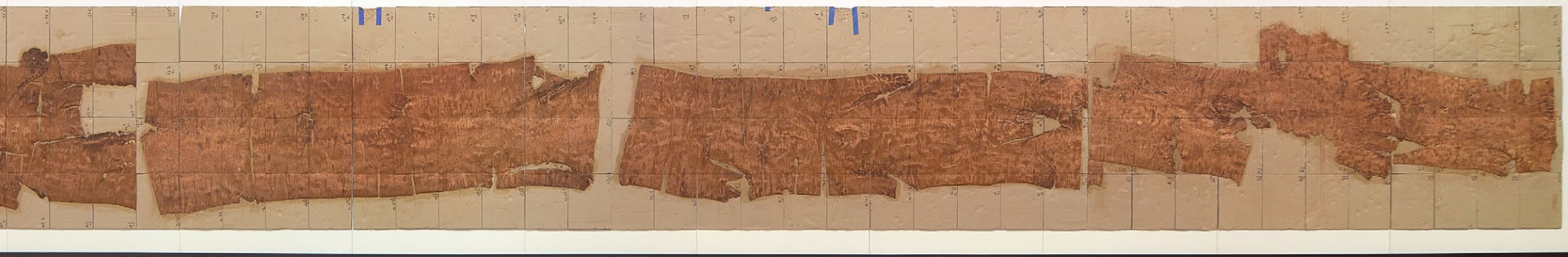
JPH: The aura you felt seems to have resonated with another listener at the performance. A mutual friend who attended vividly recalls the vigor and creativity of the musicians as they torqued and tweaked a fascinating array of instruments.[3] He felt the new sounds were at turns quiet and raucous, languid and intense. He sensed the players seemed to relish the opportunity to interpret very different "scores" to engage the audience. Amid the drawings, *T2 #1*, *T3 #3* (*Marc's Tree*), and the protean *T2* (*Bark*) and *T3* (*Bark*), the musicians delivered a varied and nuanced performance that expanded upon your original vision of a Skowhegan forest.

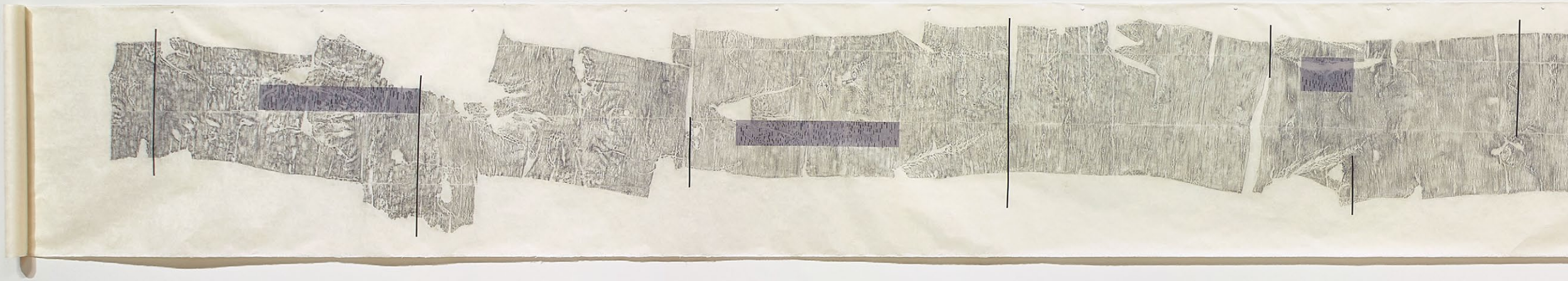
No doubt, hearing *Skowehegan Birch #3* premiered for the first time, and finally performed together in completion with *Skowhegan Birch #1 and #2* for the player piano recital, must have been an important milestone in a ten-year production of an exceptional body of work. (fig. 11) Thinking collectively about the musical program performed by *Dirt and Copper* and *Illuminated Grey Ensemble*, in addition to the videos of the three birch trees piano rolls, you have once again acknowledged the trees themselves: their music and their silence.

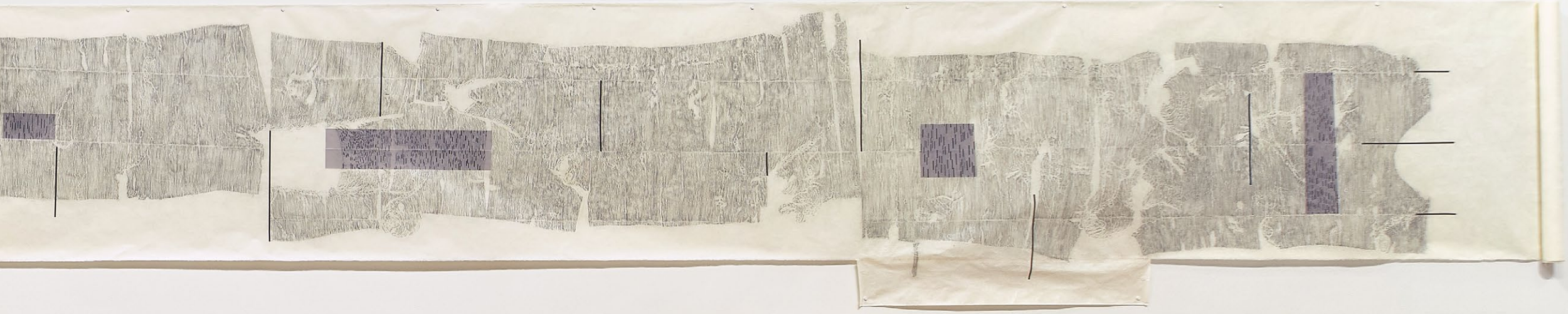
1 María Elena González and I began discussions regarding this essay in April 2015. We recorded the conversation on June 22, and since then we have had numerous subsequent communications that further shaped the conversation in its present form.

2 Congas are tall, narrow drums played with the hands.

3 I thank Tom Parker who, as a director at Hirschl & Adler Gallery, has worked closely with the artist. He observed that González sat quietly in the audience seemingly very content to let a new set of artists take up where she left off. She seemed elated as she watched them take *Tree Talk* to another level. Parker further added that at the end of the program, the audience went back to the drawings for another look at the music's origin and the process behind what they had heard. Parker thought there was an unmistakable sense of excitement as he and the audience grasped anew the limitless possibilities of this unique work of art.







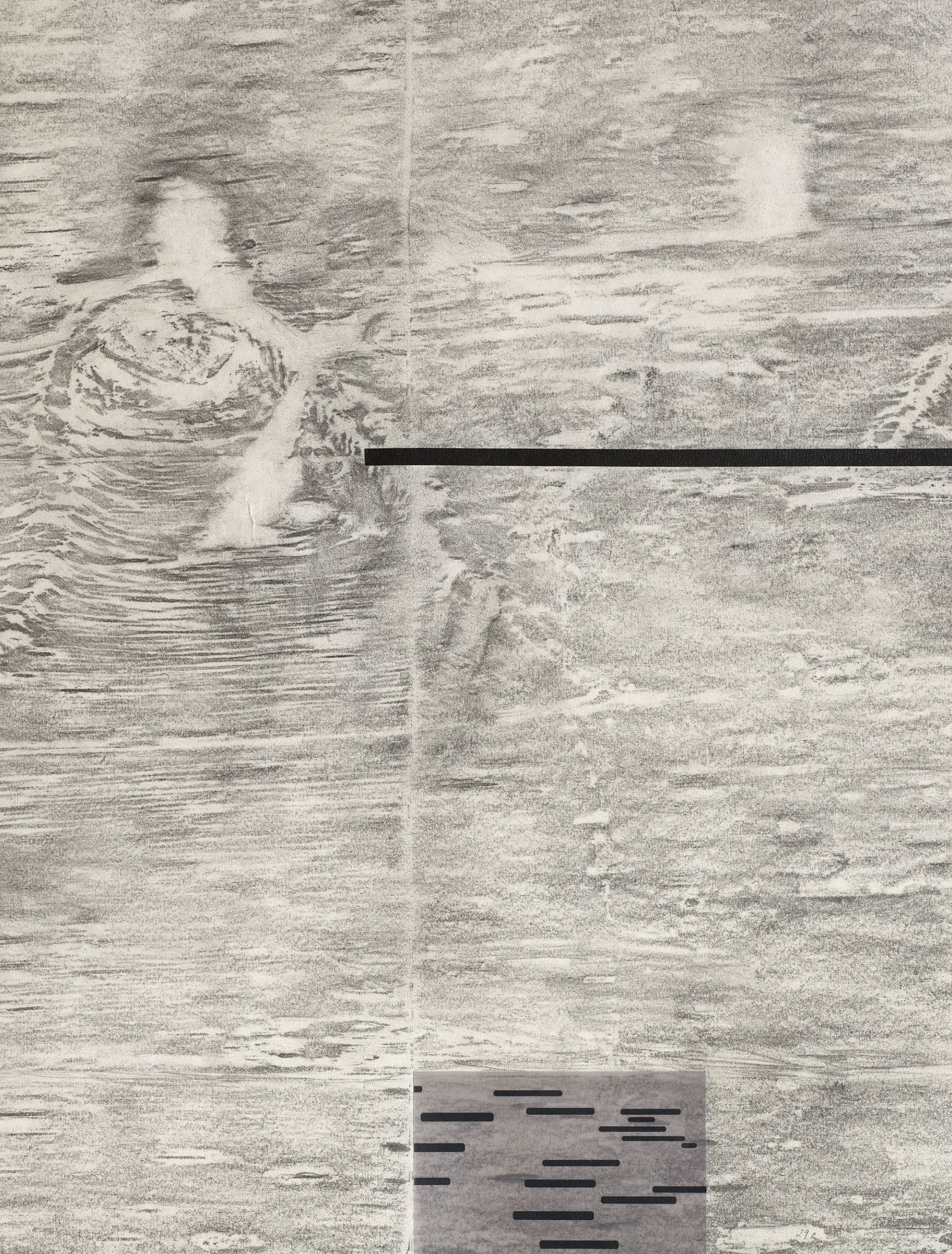


Fig. 31
Installation view of
T2 #2 1-55, 2015
Graphite, ink jet on
vellum on Japanese paper
40 in. × 45 ft.
Grand prix exhibition
at the 31st Biennial
of Graphic Arts
Gallery of Cankarjev dom
Ljubljana, Slovenia

Fig. 33
Boštjan Gombač performance
Skowhegan Birch #2
August 30, 2015
Cankarjev dom, Duša Počkaj Hall
Ljubljana, Slovenia

Fig. 32
Skowhegan Birch #1, 2005–2012
Skowhegan Birch #2, 2012–2015
Digital video with sound

Fig. 34
Performance documentation from *Variations on Impression* on February 6, 2019 featuring performances by *Dirt and Copper* led by John Ivers, and *Illuminated Grey Ensemble*, led by Marc Zollinger

Works in the Exhibition

Tempo, 2015
Video, wood, glass
Dimensions vary
Running time: 01:00:28

Skowhegan Birch #1, 2005–2012
Digital video with sound
Running time: 6:24

Skowhegan Birch #2, 2012–2015
Digital video with sound
Running time: 18:20

Skowhegan Birch #3, 2016–2018
Digital video with sound
Running time: 10:54

Bark framed #6, 2012
Birch bark, Sharpie, ink, cardboard
47 ½ × 43 ½ in.

Bark framed #1, 2012
Birch bark, Sharpie, ink, cardboard
53 ½ × 47 in.

Bark framed #2, 2012
Birch bark, Sharpie, ink, cardboard
56 ½ × 46 ½ in.

Tree Steps 1, 2005
Digital print, graphite on Bhutanese paper
14 × 8 ½ in.

T2 (Bark), 2015
Birch bark, cardboard, tape, Sharpie
Bark on cardboard: 57 in. × 40 ft. 3 in.
Mounted on museum board:
71 in. × 41 ft. 5 in.

T2 #1, 2018
Graphite, ink jet on vellum
40 in. × 45 ft.

T2 23-33, 2015
Graphite, ink, chalk, ink jet on vellum
on Japanese paper
95 × 40 in.

T2 52-54, 2015
Graphite, ink jet on vellum on Japanese paper
40 × 46 ½ in.

T2 5-8, 2015
Graphite, gouache, ink jet on vellum
on Japanese paper
40 × 39 ½ in.

T3 (Bark), 2018
Bark on cardboard: 50 in. × 49 ft 5 in.
Mounted on museum board:
62 in. × 50 ft. 5 in.

T3 #3 (Marc's Tree), 2018
Graphite, Sharpie, gouache, ink jet on vellum
40 in. × 53 ft.

T3 (1-4), 2018
Graphite, ink jet on vellum,
on Japanese paper
40 × 39 ¾ in.

T3 (9-12), 2018
Ink jet on vellum, ink,
gouache on Japanese paper
43 ½ × 39 ¾ in.

T3 (25-28), 2018
Ink jet on vellum, ink,
gouache on Japanese paper
43 ¼ × 39 ¾ in.

T3 (65-68), 2018
Ink jet on vellum, ink
on Japanese paper
43 ½ × 39 ¾ in.

Skowhegan Birch #1, 2005–2012
Player piano roll

Skowhegan Birch #2, 2012–2015
Player piano roll

Skowhegan Birch #3, 2016–2018
Player piano roll

Camo (Boogie Woogie), 2015
Silkscreen
25 ¾ × 16 ½ in.

Camo (Desert), 2015
Silkscreen
25 ¾ × 16 ½ in.

Camo (Flesh), 2015
Silkscreen
25 ¾ × 16 ½ in.

Camo (Forest), 2015
Silkscreen
25 ¾ × 16 ½ in.

Camo (National), 2015
Silkscreen
25 ¾ × 16 ½ in.

All works courtesy of the artist
and Hirschl & Adler Modern,
New York

Contributors

MARÍA ELENA GONZÁLEZ

Cuban-born artist María Elena González is an internationally recognized sculptor based in Brooklyn, NY, and the Bay Area, CA. González interweaves the conceptual with a strong dedication to craft in her complex installations and poetic arrangements, exploring themes like identity, memory, and dislocation. Over a career spanning thirty years she has won the Prix de Rome (2003), and more recently, the Grand Prize at the 30th Biennial of Graphic Arts at Ljubljana, Slovenia (2013). She was a Guggenheim Fellow (2006) and has been awarded grants from numerous foundations including Pollock-Krasner, Joan Mitchell, New York Foundation for the Arts, Anonymous Was A Woman, Creative Capital, Tiffany Foundation, Cuban Artists Fund, Art Matters, and Penny McCall. She has been a visiting critic in Sculpture at the Yale University School of Art, a resident faculty member at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and a visiting artist faculty member at The Cooper Union. She is currently Chair of the Sculpture Department at the San Francisco Art Institute. In 2017 González's work was featured in *Home: So Different, So Appealing,* presented by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and organized in collaboration with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston [as part of the Getty-funded Pacific Standard Time exhibition program]. Additionally, in 2017 her work was exhibited at the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) in *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago*. González's work can be found in numerous public collections including the Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland; Museum voor Modern Kunst, Arnhem, The Netherlands; Museum of Art, The Rhode Island

School of Design, Providence, RI; The Museum of Arts and Design, New York; and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

STEPHANIE HANOR

Stephanie Hanor is Assistant Dean and Director of Mills College Art Museum. She received her doctorate degree in Art History from the University of Texas at Austin (2003) with the dissertation *Jean Tinguely: Useless Machines and Mechanical Performers, 1955–1970*. Prior to joining the Mills College Art Museum, she was the Senior Curator and Curatorial Department Head at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. At MCASD she curated over 40 exhibitions and projects, including a series of site-specific installations featuring major works by Tara Donovan, Raymond Pettibon, and Nancy Rubins. She also organized major traveling exhibitions, including the retrospective of San Diego painter and film critic Manny Farber, the focus exhibition *Jasper Johns: Light Bulb*, and an exhibition featuring the Latin American and Latino holdings of the Museum, *TRANSactions: Contemporary Latin American and Latino Art*. At Mills College Art Museum, she oversees an active exhibition program that emphasizes site-specific commissions and supports contemporary women artists, including projects with Sarah Oppenheimer, Karen Kilimnik, Frances Stark, Hung Liu, Diana Al-Hadid, and Catherine Wagner.

JULIA P. HERZBERG

Julia P. Herzberg is an art historian, independent curator, arts writer, and Fulbright Scholar. She received her Ph.D. in Art History at the Graduate Center, City University of New York (1998) with the dissertation *Ana Mendieta: The Iowa Years, A Critical Study, 1969–1977*. She was adjunct curator at The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum, Miami (2008–2015); consulting curator for the 8th, 9th, and 10th Havana Biennials (2003–2009); consulting curator, El Museo del Barrio, NY (1996–2001); and curator of Official U.S. Representation for the III International Biennial of Painting Cuenca, Ecuador (1991). She has organized more than thirty exhibitions of artists including Wifredo Lam, Lotty Rosenfeld, Paz Errazuriz, Monica Bengoa, Monika Weiss, Ivan Navarro, Magdalena Fernández, María Elena González, Navjot Altaf, Liliana Porter, Kaarina Kaikkonen, Leandro Katz, Pepón Osorio, Raquel Rabinovich, Catalina Parra, Franco Mondini–Ruiz, Leandro Erlich, and Chen, Xiaoyung. Most recent publications include "Past–Present: Conversations with María Lau and Katarina Wong" for the exhibition catalogue *Circles and Circuits: Chinese Caribbean Art* (2018). Dr. Herzberg has taught, lectured, and published in the U.S. and abroad as invited professor at the Institute of Art, Pontífica Universidad Católica de Valparaiso, 2016; Fulbright Scholar at The University Diego Portales and the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, Chile, 2013, Fulbright professor at the Pontífica Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile in 2007. She was a Consulting and Contributing Editor for *Arte al Dia* International (2005–2018); her papers reside at the Archive of American Art, Smithsonian.

MARSHALL N. PRICE

Marshall N. Price is the Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University and adjunct faculty in the university's Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies. He received a Ph.D. in Art History from the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Before joining the Nasher Museum, Price was Curatorial Assistant at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art and from 2003 until 2014 held the position of Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the National Academy Museum, New York. He has organized numerous exhibitions including *Nina Chanel Abney: Royal Flush*, *Colour Correction: British and American Screenprints, 1967–75*, *Jeffrey Gibson: Said the Pigeon to the Squirrel,* and *John Cage: The Sight of Silence*, among others.

Acknowledgements

This publication would not have been possible without the generous support of Agnes Gund and The Jay DeFeo Foundation. Their vision helps to provide new scholarship and new audiences for this important series. Philanthropic Advisor to Agnes Gund, Sonia L. Lopez's, advocacy was instrumental to the realization of this publication. We are indebted to Marshall N. Price and Julia P. Herzberg for their insightful texts that further our understanding of the role of sound in the artist's process, specifically, in context of the history of musical experimentation. John Borruso has designed a beautiful publication featuring images by Phil Bond and Jaka Babnik. In addition, we thank Jayna Swartzman-Brosky for her skillful editing and production management.

A project of this size, scope, and time frame involves a multitude of supporters, partners, and contributors. We extend our sincere thanks to everyone involved in the successful realization of the myriad elements—exhibitions, performances, and publications—that *Tree Talk* incorporates. We would like to acknowledge all of the people who have helped each step of the way.

Several individuals were very generous with technical and historical information and advice: Bob Berkman, pianolist; Bob Billings, owner, Sierra Music Rolls; Yutaka Makino, artist; and Vincent W. Morgan, Vice President of the Lady Liberty Chapter of AMICA (Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association). These individuals have

been instrumental to realizing this piece. Kenneth Wachtel gave his time and expertise in editing the video. Laser Cutting Shapes' professionalism and precision is unparalleled.

Lowery Stokes Sims included the first iteration of this project in her exhibition *Against the Grain: Wood in Contemporary Art, Craft and Design* at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. We would like to acknowledge Deborah Cullen, who curated the 30th Ljubljana Biennial, and to the esteemed jurors who selected *Tree Talk* for the Grand Prize: Tevž Logar, Chema de Francisco, Salley Tallant, and Dusica Kirkakovic.

Support and work from friends, interns, studio assistants, and colleagues were vital to the successful completion of this series. Heartfelt gratitude go to Cassandra Brown, Alexis Cadenas, Christopher Carroll, Katherine Chi, Jeffrey Gibson, Jennie C. Jones, Ashely Kuo, Kaitlin Mazzei, Richard Reutlinger, Katie Sonnenborn, Sarah Workneh, Julia Aurora Guzmán, Nicole Alvarado Hernández, Izidora Leber LETHE and Leying Zhang.

In addition, we appreciate the hard work of the International Centre of Graphic Arts (MGLC) team: Nevenka Šivavec, Yasmin Martín Vodopivec, Lili Šturm, Breda Škrjanec, Petra Klučar, and Alenka Mikuž. We would like to acknowledge Božidar Zrinski for his patience, curatorial insights, and clarity of vision; and Slavko Pavlin for his masterful guidance in realizing the artist's first silkscreens.

The realization of this was made possible by the following institutions: Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant, San Francisco Art Institute, and the Fleishhacker Foundation. We would also like to thank Ted Holland at Hirschl & Adler Modern, who was invaluable in helping to coordinate loans, shipping, and images, and Tom Parker, Associate Director at Hirschl & Adler Galleries, for his on-going support of this project. Further gratitude is owed to Timothy Baxter of Meliora Music Rolls, who supplied the rolls for *Skowhegan Birch #2 & #3*.

The beautiful and compelling exhibition installation was due to the skill, hard-work, and attention to detail of our talented art installers and fabricators: Joseph Ferriso, Sean Howe, Joseph Melamed, Ivan Navarro, Emma Spertus, Deirdre Visser, and Victor Yañez-Lazcano. We are very grateful the expertise of MCAM's staff: Luke Turner for starting the project and exhibitions manager, Eli Thorne for carefully managing all aspects of the exhibition.

A major component of the *Tree Talk* exhibition was the opportunity to collaborate with musicians to realize live performances on the player piano. Thanks are due also to Boštjan Gombač, whose extraordinary musical talents brought the Skowhegan birch trees back to life in such

a magical way. Extended gratitude to William Holmes, Bob Gonzalez, composer Paul Dresher, and Randolph Herr, who played *Skowhegan Birch #1*.

Composers John Ivers and Marc Zollinger each presented unique musical ensemble pieces using drawings in the exhibition as graphic scores. We are very grateful to John, Marc, and the musicians in the ensembles *Dirt and Copper* and *Illuminated Grey Ensemble* for the experimental, interdisciplinary performances that they produced. The live premier performance of *Skowhegan Birch #3* would not have been possible without Piedmont Piano Company.

Above all, many thanks go to the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, which provided the source of inspiration for this project. Finally, we need to acknowledge the trees themselves—their music, their silence. The *Tree Talk* series would not have been possible without their generosity.

—María Elena González and Stephanie Hanor

MILLS COLLEGE
ART MUSEUM

ISBN 978-0-9854600-6-8
52500>