

Antonia Hirsch: String Theory. A Note.

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It is appropriate that a work predicated on closely observed contingencies of scale and presence should appear in the enclosed but malleable space of the Xeno Gallery, a 50 foot square alcove attached to Dadabase, a small boutique at the corner of Main and Broadway. Though *String Theory* is embedded, even half-hidden, in a quasi-commercial space, it also inhabits a neighborhood, a faded-but-resurgent edge of the downtown core, eager to accept the rewards of the type of hybridity the work — as “art” — serves to authenticate. Thus even before being seen, *String Theory* makes an awareness of location the first of the pre-conditions it enacts on its viewers.

This question of location persists in bluntly practical terms, for even in the designated gallery space, once past another artist’s window display and the body of the store, the somewhat dark ante-room that constitutes the Xeno Gallery appears empty save for a door at its opposite end. Anecdotal reports of visitors wandering into the area, staring at the eye level wall spaces where the art would presumably be and walking away bemused are sadly believable, but only barely. For again, *String Theory* is in careful control of its effects, and enters the senses on its own peripheral terms; the initial impression is one of ghostly insubstantiality coalescing into form with deliberation, even reluctance. A reverse hallucination, perhaps; a moment of clarification deferred as long as possible.

Flush against the right wall, parallel to the floor and in size not much larger than a mouse hole, the moving surface of its projection seems to hover momentarily as the eye becomes dark-adapted. The image is of a woman skipping, at times haltingly, in an indeterminate dark space. The sound, when it emerges from the rest of the city’s considerable undertone, is an amplification of the figure’s action; most vividly the echoing thud of feet. Very little of the figure is visible beyond its extremities, which seem to emit rather than receive an iridescent blue light. The skipping rope, depending on the speed of its movement, trails its own more brightly phosphorescent light in variously intertwining and overlapping shapes. But to make these details out is not easy, viewers must crouch, adjust their sight lines, gather up their hems — a corrective tilt of the head seemed helpful for some. It is for a moment almost as if the artist means us to recall not only one of the stock figures of holographic representation — the “dancing” (potentially revolving) figure — but to replicate that form’s notorious difficulty of apprehension. But like a speaker strategically lowering her voice, *String Theory* diminishes scale in order to compel attention. To experience the work as anything other than a suggestive blur involves an active bodily commitment not unrelated to that of its endlessly skipping subject. Absorption becomes the last of *String Theory*’s pre-conditions.

For if *String Theory* — with its title, loping mobius strips and stretched infinity signs — enters a discourse of science, it does so bodily. Experimental science is, after all, an abstraction of human labour; I do this in order to find out about that. If *String Theory* attempts to restore through aesthetic manipulation a human trace to the bodiless patriarchy of science, it also functions as an experiment

in its own right. In this way, its repetitions function not as gestural solipsisms but as a legitimate ground of enquiry.

A first clue as to the kind of data that such an enquiry might generate occurred at the point when I realised that the work's central figure is not, at least compared to the still-vivid memories of the girls I grew up with, much of a skipper. To watch the drama of *String Theory*'s doll-like, quasi-abstracted figure struggling with the arbitrary demands of its self-appointed task--feet sometimes tangling in jerking uncertain rhythms — is to see a struggle with the legitimacy of artistic process literally embodied. The skipper skips on determinedly, as if in hope that purpose and meaning will at some point be triumphantly revealed, that fleeting accidents of light and movement might be made to signify.

The theoretical speculations of string theory itself, in which (as far as I can make it out) the very largest and very smallest of the universe's components are united in gleeful instability, serve only to mock the relentlessly Newtonian discourse of the body the work can't help but describe: the steep stairs, the hills down which a bicycle can be freely coasted. The endless work of day-to-day existence, the humiliating drudgery of artmaking. But if the condition *String Theory* depicts is thus circumscribed, the process of its depiction deliberately enacts paradox. It is a representation of solitude that demands an intimate response; a record of base physical effort made in terms of luminous insubstantiality. It is an experiment whose results are inscribed on its constantly receding surface.

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