

# Karen Reimer: Shoretime Spaceline

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Pages 1-7 | Published online: 27 Mar 2017

Look up, the sky is falling or rather floating just above your head. Look down, the lake lies in front of you, vast and serene.



Figure 1 Karen Reimer: *Shoretime Spaceline*, 2016, mixed-media installation (over 200 yards of hand-dyed fabric, 40 tons of sand, plywood). Photo: Tom Van Eynde. Courtesy of the Hyde Park Art Center.

In her installation *Shoretime Spaceline* (2016), Karen Reimer distorts our perceptions of space and time: the sky becomes the sea, the sea becomes the sky, the present and past combine. Responding to the spatial and historical dimensions of the Hyde Park Art Center's (HPAC) physical site, the artist transforms nature into a soft surface of pattern, color and light, a suspended fabric canopy that horizontally bisects the interior spaces of the central gallery (Figure 1).

Stitched from scraps of clothing, house linens, and found fabrics, then hand-dyed blue, the resultant textile, crafted in a bold geometry of linear panels and radiating orbs, measures over 200 yards. When viewed from ground level, the work appears celestial, in both its secular and spiritual sense, at times simulating stained glass. From the vantage point of the HPAC's second-floor catwalk, where one stands as if onshore, the blue expanse evokes a rolling tide.

The water reference here is actually to Lake Michigan and to the Chicago Beach Hotel, which once stood on or near the HPAC's current location. Built in 1892 to house tourists for the Columbian Exposition of 1893, this grand Art Deco hotel, demolished in 1927, was also home to some of the city's wealthy South Side residents. The hotel's private beach was created by dredging sand from the lake to extend the shoreline, thus claiming a

larger parcel of the beachfront. The artist "re-enacts" this bit of history within her installation by transporting 40 tons of sand from the nearby lakefront into the HPAC's main gallery; a wooden boardwalk constructed from indigenous wood allows visitors to traverse the space as if strolling the hotel's sandy beach.

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Figure 2 Karen Reimer, Detail of *Shoretime Spaceline*, 2016, mixed-media installation. Photo: Tom Van Eynde. Courtesy of the Hyde Park Art Center.

Artifacts from the artist's research displayed within a vitrine serve as both evidence and narrative props: a book open to an entry on the Chicago Beach Hotel; two cell phones, the screen of each bearing a vintage postcard of the luxury resort; a cross-section of a native red oak, whose concentric rings date back to the time of the hotel's existence; bricks suggestive of the hotel's turrets excavated from the site when the HPAC moved to its present location in 2005. Performing a kind of urban archeology, Reimer gives physical presence to buried histories while pointing to the shared genealogies of two very different architectural institutions—one private, one public. Chicago's lakefront has always been contested territory of clashing private and public interests. Thus, the Chicago Beach Hotel becomes a symbol of bold private development at odds with the progressive ideals of the Columbian Exposition for which it was built, as well as those of Daniel Burnham, whose Plan of Chicago (1909) dictates that the lakefront remains forever open and free to public access. At the same time, Reimer's site-specific tableau reinforces the long-standing importance of the HPAC, a community-based arts organization and stalwart of the Chicago art scene since 1939 supporting local artists and serving broad publics.

The installation's monumental textile adds another layer to this topography (Figure 2). Soft and tensile, it adapts to its host site while grafting new narratives to these histories.

Considering the site's origins as a former luxury hotel, the artist's patchwork conflates issues of labor, class, and leisure. Embedded within its seams are the invisible hands of labor, whose work supported the recreation and tourism industry and whose labor one might equate with Reimer's own dedicated handwork. Moreover, it becomes an architectural structure in its own right—an example, perhaps, of what Lisa Robertson has termed “soft architecture”—challenging the structural stability of known architectural forms, particularly the steel-and-glass modernism that defines so much of Chicago's skyline. “The work of the Soft Architecture, simultaneously strong and weak, makes new descriptions on the warp of former events,” states Robertson (Robertson, Lisa. 2011. “Soft Architecture: A Manifesto.” *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. Toronto: Coach House Books. 21). For Reimer, these descriptions relate to nature and to the body, as evinced by the swatches of worn clothing and domestic textiles used in the construction of her blue canopy. This shelter-like form also connects to a lineage of alternative living structures, bioclimatic enclosures and nomadic architecture; the work's stylized spheres are reminiscent of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes (Figure 3).

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Figure 3 Karen Reimer: *Shoretime Spaceline*, 2016, mixed-media installation (over 200 yards of hand-dyed fabric, 40 tons of sand, plywood). Photo: Tom Van Eynde. Courtesy of the Hyde Park Art Center.

At the core of Reimer's textile-based practice is the belief in handcraft as an act of labor; value is created through the slow, cumulative process of stitching, and through the reuse of remnants of cloth inhabited with their own domestic and social histories. In fact, portions of the textiles used in the construction of *Shoretime Spaceline* were recycled from the artist's installation *Cold Comfort* (2001), created in collaboration with Constance Bacon, at the HPAC's previous location in the Del Prado Hotel (Figure 4). The artists sheathed the gallery's worn beaux-arts interior in a white fabric skin patched from secondhand garments, sheets and linens, stretched taut over a wooden scaffolding that functioned simultaneously as support and secondary interior. This ornamental space, once a ballroom, was transformed into a modernist white cube, albeit one that problematizes the divide between Western modernism's strict classicism and craft's expressive materiality.



Figure 4 Karen Reimer, in collaboration with Constance Bacon, Installation view of *Cold Comfort*, 2001, fabric and wood, at the Hyde Park Art Center. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Reimer's interest in the relationship between architecture and handcraft has played out in other Chicago-based site-specific works. For *Brown Cube* (2005), (Figure 5) the artist layered horizontal and vertical bands of brown cloth onto the rails and balustrades of the central atrium of the Durand Art Institute at Lake Forest College, reconfiguring the space as an ethereal floating cage. In *Endless Set #1399* (2012), she mapped the

interior of Gallery 400 using a system of prime numbers, with the number 1399 abstracted then hand drawn in chalk and pencil onto the walls, floor and ceiling of the gallery. The origins of this work reside in a similarly titled series of pieced pillowcases appliqued with prime numbers, which were shown folded and stacked alongside the spatial drawing (Figure 6).



Figure 6 Karen Reimer, Installation view of *Endless Set #1399*, 2012, appliqued pillowcases on wooden platform and graphite and chalk on wall, at Gallery 400, Chicago. Photo courtesy of the artist.

References to minimalist sculpture are intentional, and elsewhere, as in *Shoretime Spaceline*, Reimer explores the juncture between monumental abstract forms, architectural systems and craft. Her symbolic abstraction, while more referential here than in past works, continues the artist's ongoing search for rendering the immaterial material.

## Reference

1. Robertson, Lisa. 2011. "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto." *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. Toronto: Coach House Books.