

RENÉE GREEN

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
"Renée Green:
Pacing," at the
Carpenter Center
for the Visual Arts,
Harvard University,
Cambridge, Mass.,
through Apr. 15.

Interview by William S. Smith
Portrait by Len Rubenstein

IN THE STUDIO



View of Renée Green's exhibition "Tracing," 2016, at Spazio Culturale Antonio Ratti, Como, Italy. Photo Agustino Osio.

All Green artwork courtesy Free Agent Media.



LE CORBUSIER NEVER saw the finished Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, a building he designed in the early 1960s for Harvard University. Josep Lluís Sert, a former colleague of Le Corbusier's and dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, oversaw the construction while the ailing Swiss architect remained in Europe. A striking presence on the Harvard campus at the time of its completion in 1963, the reinforced concrete-and-glass structure is elevated on pillars and connected to the street by long, swooping ramps. While idiosyncratic in form, the building anticipates the Brutalist style that would become prevalent in the architecture of New England universities and civic institutions in the 1970s.

The history of the structure, the ambitions of its architect, and the meaning of modernist architecture in the Americas are the subjects of a new film that arose from artist Renée Green's unusual two-year project with the Carpenter Center. The film was in development when I met with her in December at her home in Somerville, a short walk from both Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she is on the faculty in the School of Architecture and Planning. Since 2016, Green has been hosting discussions, screening her previous films, and exhibiting selections of the work she has been producing in a wide array of formats and mediums. Titled "Pacing," this slow-motion project—part residency, part retrospective—culminates with the opening of an exhibition this month. It became clear as we spoke that Green understood "Pacing" not only as an invitation to display her art, but as an opportunity to investigate the cultural and intellectual context that gave rise to the university art institution, and to explore what it means to inherit and work within that context.

"Pacing" follows a year of related solo exhibitions for Green: "Spacing" in Lisbon, "Placing" in Berlin, "Tracing" in Como, Italy, and "Facing" in Toronto. The Carpenter Center show represents a homecoming of sorts, marking one of the first opportunities in more than a decade for East Coast audiences to engage with the work of an artist who lived and worked in Europe for many years. The focus on Le Corbusier also affords her an opportunity to revisit a key early piece. "Secret" (1993) comprises photos, texts, videos, and drawings Green produced while camping out in the Unité d'Habitation apartment tower in Firminy, France—one of the architect's iconic social housing complexes.

Though critics often discuss Green's practice in relation to the history of institutional critique, she frequently seeks to expand the possibilities of working within institutions. Green has even taken on the mantle of an institution herself, producing films and publishing texts under the moniker Free Agent Media. Her practice in this regard can be collaborative, involving the input of many contributors. Her texts and films are peppered with overt references to other artists, writers, and thinkers. During our conversation, she discussed Nathaniel Mackey's notion of "discrepant engagement," characterizing the work of black diaspora writers, before delving into Structural filmmaker Hollis Frampton's theoretical work on the distinction between film and video.

This "methodology of citation," as art historian Alexander Alberro has called it, evident in Green's prolific critical writing, is also the foundation for her films, in which she engages with the work of other artists and writers in a conversational way, as an oblique means of exploring her own life and experiences.

Partially Buried in Three Parts (1996–97), for example, is a video and installation about the afterlife of Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), an iconic earthwork he constructed at Kent State University in Ohio, where Green's mother was teaching at the time National Guardsmen opened fire on student protesters. In recent years, architects have proven to be particularly generative interlocutors for Green. In 2015 she had an exhibition at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles, which occupies expatriate architect Rudolph M. Schindler's modernist home. The show featured an installation of colorful banners emblazoned with texts and dates related to the architect's life and a series of videos depicting a compressed history of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Green also produced the single-channel *Begin Again, Begin Again* (2015), an essayistic film that weaves together shots of the building, short selections of archival imagery, and footage Green shot underwater and in train tunnels. A narrator reads selections of Schindler's writings as well as fragments of texts by other expatriates and exiles.

"Living architecture," Green writes in her 2014 book *Other Planes of There*, "means an acceptance of ruins to come." Rather than mourning such ruins, Green is fascinated by how they might be reanimated in the future. At the core of her project for the Carpenter Center is a concern with how ideas are transmitted from the past to the present, from the dead to the living.

WILLIAM S. SMITH How did your project for the Carpenter Center originate?

RENÉE GREEN I was initially invited by former Carpenter Center director James Voorhies to participate in a project he titled "Institution (Building)." I've been trying to test what that could mean by taking the title very literally—thinking about buildings and institutions, and all the different implications of

those two words coming together. When I think about "institution," it brings me to Michel Foucault's understanding of that term and the legacies of institutional critique in art.

The title I gave my overall project is "Pacing." The two-year duration of this project is longer than the usual exhibition time frame, and "Pacing" has been an ongoing experience: I've installed videos in the space, I've placed traces of my past work and processes in vitrines, screened some of my films, including *ED/HF* [2017], and held talks so far, including one with media historian Gloria Sutton. This month I will open an exhibition of my work, and I am currently working on a new film in relation to this project.

SMITH And when you say you're taking the building literally, do you mean focusing on the physical structure of the Carpenter Center?

GREEN One of the reasons I accepted the invitation is because the Carpenter Center is within walking distance of my home and my office at MIT. It's unusual for me to be able to go back again and again to a site and explore it in depth. I haven't been able to approach a project in this way since the exhibition I had in 1999 at the Secession in Vienna, where I was living and working as a professor.

I am surrounded by architects, being in the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT. And the Graduate School of Design at Harvard is very near the Carpenter Center. I liked the idea of bringing a perspective that I've been developing at both institutions. This architectural dimension is very present in my existence. It's a long-term interest of mine since childhood, not some *Dwell* magazine trend. I'm thinking about spaces, buildings, materials—all different aspects of architecture.

SMITH And Le Corbusier in particular?

GREEN Well, Le Corbusier in part. In the early 1990s I was invited to be in an exhibition in one of the architect's Unité

View of the installation *Renée Green, Pacing: FAM Case (1994–2000)*, at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Cambridge, Mass., 2017. Photo Tony Luong.



FAM Case (1994-2000)

“All kinds of unexpected things happen when you compose, write, or build something that exists in the world among people.”

d'Habitation. At the time, half the building was occupied and the other half was not. Yves Aupetitallot, one of the organizers, was curious about the situation in the building and wanted to see what could be possible if artists and architects engaged with the site and produced projects for the unoccupied part. I took the invitation literally in that case as well. I went there twice: once to check out the site and then to stay in the building for a week—I was essentially camped out in an empty apartment with no electricity or running water.

I did a lot of reading about the location. I like to think about places in relation to the literature that developed out of them. Émile Zola's novel *Germinal* gave me something to think about while I was staring out the window. I also kept a diary, recorded sound and video, and took photographs inside the building. The seventy-three works in that series will be part of the exhibition at the Carpenter Center.

SMITH Your written account of the experience makes it sound somewhat traumatic: you were ill part of the time, there were break-ins.

GREEN The idea of travel has so many different valences, and this was definitely not a romantic excursion. I wanted to explore

the building physically and viscerally, which I did, subjecting myself to this deserted wing. I heard someone burglarizing a space near mine one night. Equipment for some of the artists' presentations was stolen. I spoke with a few architects who were part of the project about my stay there, and they told me: “Wow, that sounds like a nightmare.”

SMITH But you were also able to interact with some of the building's residents.

GREEN I had a key that allowed me to move between the occupied and unoccupied parts of the structure. I was curious about the tension inherent in designating a location as a temporary exhibition site while people lived there all the time.

SMITH One of the most striking photographs from the project depicts a quilted vest with the word IMMIGRATION emblazoned on it. You wore the vest while wandering around the building. What were you trying to convey about your presence to the building's residents, many of whom were immigrants?

GREEN I got that vest from an Army surplus store near Canal Street in New York, so I think it was originally intended to be part of an official uniform. But I wanted to understand what this word might mean in an entirely different context. It was a way for me to engage with residents, many of whom were immigrants from North Africa. People took notice. More than anything it was a conversation starter—and it provoked a lot of laughter.

SMITH At the end of your diary account you describe an eruption of violence at the opening party for the exhibition. One of the building's residents started throwing punches and had to be escorted out.

GREEN It was incredible. When the show opened, Parisians and people from the art world came into an economically depressed area. The class differences between these visitors and the building's inhabitants were very apparent.

SMITH Have you been back?

GREEN No. The building is still standing, but I don't know what condition it's in now. I'm interested in the living relationship between the building structure and the people who inhabit it. There's a tension between the history of a building and its present condition—between what the architect imagined it would be and the structure that visitors or residents might actually encounter. In the deserted part of the Unité I encountered the remnants of the people who had inhabited it and saw their attempts to personalize the spaces, to break out of the standardized, ideal form.

An architect's process is both related to and different from an artist's approach. Buildings are meant to be used in a way that art isn't. This is something I talk about with my students. Some of them previously worked at architecture firms and then decided that they wanted to be artists because they imagine that they won't be constrained by the need to deliver useful products. I'm always challenging that presumption, as actions imply consequences. From my perspective as an artist, everybody is working under constraints of different kinds. People can try to exceed those constraints, but there's always an unpredictable aspect to any process of making or



Photo from the series *Secret* (*Black and White Photographs*), 1993, 10 by 7 inches.



ED/HF,
2017, digital film,
33 minutes.

fabricating. All kinds of unexpected things happen when you compose, write, or build something that exists in the world among people.

SMITH At what point does this unpredictable aspect become failure? Would you consider the Unité d'Habitation a failure? It was supposed to be a rational solution for housing people, and yet the building in Firminy, at least, fell into disrepair. Was your project an indictment on some level? Even more broadly, were you suggesting that the ideology behind modernist architecture had failed?

GREEN I wouldn't say failure. I know failure is popular as a description these days. But "failure" is complicated. There could be many layers to it. I'm definitely not making an indictment of modernism. I'm more concerned with probing the aspirations of artists and architects through time.

In the film I'm making, which doesn't have a title yet, I'm looking at Le Corbusier's aspirations for the Carpenter Center. In the late 1950s, Josep Lluís Sert invited Le Corbusier to Harvard for the commission. This was toward the end of his career as an architect, and he never actually visited the completed building. That's one node of the film. I'm also looking at Le Corbusier's ambitions for Buenos Aires. He imagined designing a new city there, and he hoped to obtain commissions from people in Argentina.

But he designed only one structure that ended up being built in Argentina, Casa Curutchet, and it was not on the scale or part of the trajectory he had hoped for. It was an out-of-left-field invitation to build a private home for a doctor in La Plata, about a forty-minute drive from Buenos Aires. The house had an office where the doctor had his practice, and he was also designing surgical tools and developing new surgical methods.

Le Corbusier is famous and regarded as very successful. He's the subject of numerous publications that describe his success. Yet there were major projects that he was unable to realize. He didn't even get close to what he was imagining. He wrote an entire book about his disappointment in America. He saw himself designing the United Nations headquarters and realizing other grand schemes that had to do with what he saw as humanitarianism. But then things don't really work out the way they're imagined. The human aspect is what usually goes berserk.

SMITH In *Other Planes of There* you write that "home is a slippery concept." After decades of traveling widely and working with museums and art venues around the world, here you are at the Carpenter Center, which is as close to home as any institution could be. And yet you're diverting attention elsewhere, conducting research in Argentina and linking the Harvard site to the one in La Plata.

GREEN I'm interested in looking at the Americas—including North, Central, and South, as well as the islands in the Caribbean. These places are still considered the "New World" in some strains of European thought. Europeans have historically associated the Americas with blankness, openness, and availability, and indulged fantasies about freedom and the so-called frontier. And then there are other associations: wilderness, wasteland, the deserts, the unknown, the mysterious. These characterizations are part of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thought, and they filter into Le Corbusier's conceptions about different parts of the world that he didn't know.

SMITH Several of your recent films focus on artists and architects who, like you, did get to know multiple parts of the world. *ED/HF*, for example, considers the filmmaker Harun Farocki in what you've called a "film as conversation."



View of the installation *Renée Green, Pacing: Media Bichos/Wavelinks*, 2017, wood frames, textiles, tables, and seating, dimensions variable, at the Carpenter Center, 2017. Photo Tony Luong.

GREEN The title *ED/HF* stands for Extraterritorial Durations/Harun Farocki. The filmmaker, who grew up in Germany, India, and Indonesia, was never autobiographical or confessional in his work. His films are never about a direct relationship to his experience of travel or displacement. I'm interested in how there's more of an ambience or a feeling of tense complexity that comes through than a one-to-one statement about identity.

I've found that film is a way to think about people who circulate between different locations and pick up different languages with a certain amount of fluidity. In his 1970 book *Extraterritorial*, George Steiner cites Borges, Beckett, and Nabokov as examples of figures who were able to adapt to different conditions and create, through their use of language, other modes of perception.

More broadly, this extraterritoriality is a way to think about this kind of movement—caused by war, displacement, and exile—as a core twentieth-century experience. And of course that hasn't abated. We're living through a continuation of that experience, and this articulated notion of exile can be very generative. At certain moments, people who had been displaced and grew up in diasporic communities have been able to make interesting literature or music in response to that experience.

SMITH Do you understand your own practice as an artist within this tradition? At one point in *ED/HF*, a narrator can be heard listing various years in Farocki's life and noting key events in his childhood and student years. But it becomes clear that a few of the dates and events are most likely related to your experiences and memories during the years when your lives overlapped.

GREEN The film was an exploration of how to think about my relation to these broader twentieth-century experiences. The specific project that opens in February at the Carpenter Center, which falls within the framework of "Pacing," is titled "Within Living Memory." One of my interests is exploring the overlapping lives of people who were born at different times. In this case, Le Corbusier [1887–1965], but also Viennese architect Rudolph M. Schindler [1887–1953], who migrated to California around 1914.

I will also present "Selected Life Indexes" [2005/2015], the figures at the center of which are W. E. B. Du Bois [1868–1963], Albert Einstein [1879–1955], Paul Robeson [1898–1976], Muriel Rukeyser [1913–1980] and Lou Harrison [1917–2003]. I've created letterpress prints that include elements from the lives of each of these people, so the scope of the project spans from 1868 to the present.

I want to understand the different kinds of crossings that take place within a given span of time, imagining what kinds of things people could have said or experienced. What would be the relay between ideas, perceptions, sensations? It's a completely overwhelming thought. It's like some Borgesian idea. In one of Borges's stories, "Funes el memorioso," the character develops an ability to remember everything perfectly. The story indicates what would happen in that instance: madness.

A building can be a nexus for the kinds of crossings that I'm interested in. When it comes to a physical space like a building one can imagine the different sorts of experiences of the people passing through. This is recurring in my work: the buildings remain, perhaps, but the people don't.

SMITH I first encountered your work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where you had installed "Media Bichos," portable wood-and-fabric kiosks that enclosed monitors and a few stools. It was a way for visitors to access the museum's collection of film and video art. In *Other Planes of There*, you write of aiming to create "a private space for reflection in a public space." How did you use the "Bichos" at the Carpenter Center?

GREEN The seven videos from my series "Wavelinks" [2002] were on view last summer in the "Bichos." These are works about electronic music in different cities around the world. I make a distinction between digital films and videos, and the "Wavelinks" works are definitely videos. Part of this has to do with sites of display, and the "Media Bichos" are really good sites for video works that can be reconfigured in different ways, viewed in different orders. But I'm still working out the essential differences between film and video. A video for me wouldn't necessarily be as layered. These terms are confusing right now, mostly because they're still tied to the material of a medium and the thinking processes associated with each. I think of Hollis Frampton's writing on Structuralist film and his attempts to parse film and video based on the different histories of the mediums.

The history of video art is still very much within living memory. Being in relation with pioneers like Joan Jonas or Yvonne Rainer affects how I think. The conversations are still going on with the people who initially worked through the possibilities of certain mediums. I remember showing work at the Clocktower Gallery in New York some time ago, an event attended by people from the video community and the filmmaking community. I was presenting works that I thought of as films, although they were made with a combination of media, with video and Super 8 footage. Yvonne pointed out that she clearly saw my work as filmic: what I was doing was in the language of cinema even though video was involved. In the spring Yvonne is going to be speaking with me about the exhibition and my new films at the Carpenter Center.

SMITH The layered quality of your recent films stems in part from the mix of archival footage and scenes you've shot, including lots of natural imagery—forests, mountains, as well as underwater footage showing reefs and jellyfish. In *Begin Again, Begin Again*, the soundtrack

includes a recitation of a programmatic statement for modern architecture written by Schindler. He describes how the architect's ability to master space will eventually lead to humankind's mastery of the natural world. How does the natural environment figure into the intellectual and cultural contexts that are the focus of your research?

GREEN The multivalence of environments through time and what is referred to as nature are extremely important to all aspects of what I make. The link between how the natural world is represented—what's expected of it—and how it actually exists is very much connected to my thinking about the aspirations of architecture. Especially in the Americas, the ideas people project onto the environment—about the openness of the “frontier”—have been a strong historical force.

SMITH Archival research has been central to your practice since the 1990s. You've also been engaged with digital tools and circulated your work online. How does network technology facilitate your work today?

GREEN Now there is quite a lot of online digital access to archives, which makes it easier to obtain footage for a film. Still, certain material never surfaces, and things can get buried in archives. Even though I read voraciously and use archives, I'd like to move away from a fixation on “the archive,” which has been fetishized. Even when you find something interesting, if you don't know what it is, it becomes just kind of quirky. What makes an archive valuable is that you can discover things and understand them in a context. Scholarly knowledge is the ability to recognize something and make associations, creating a deeper

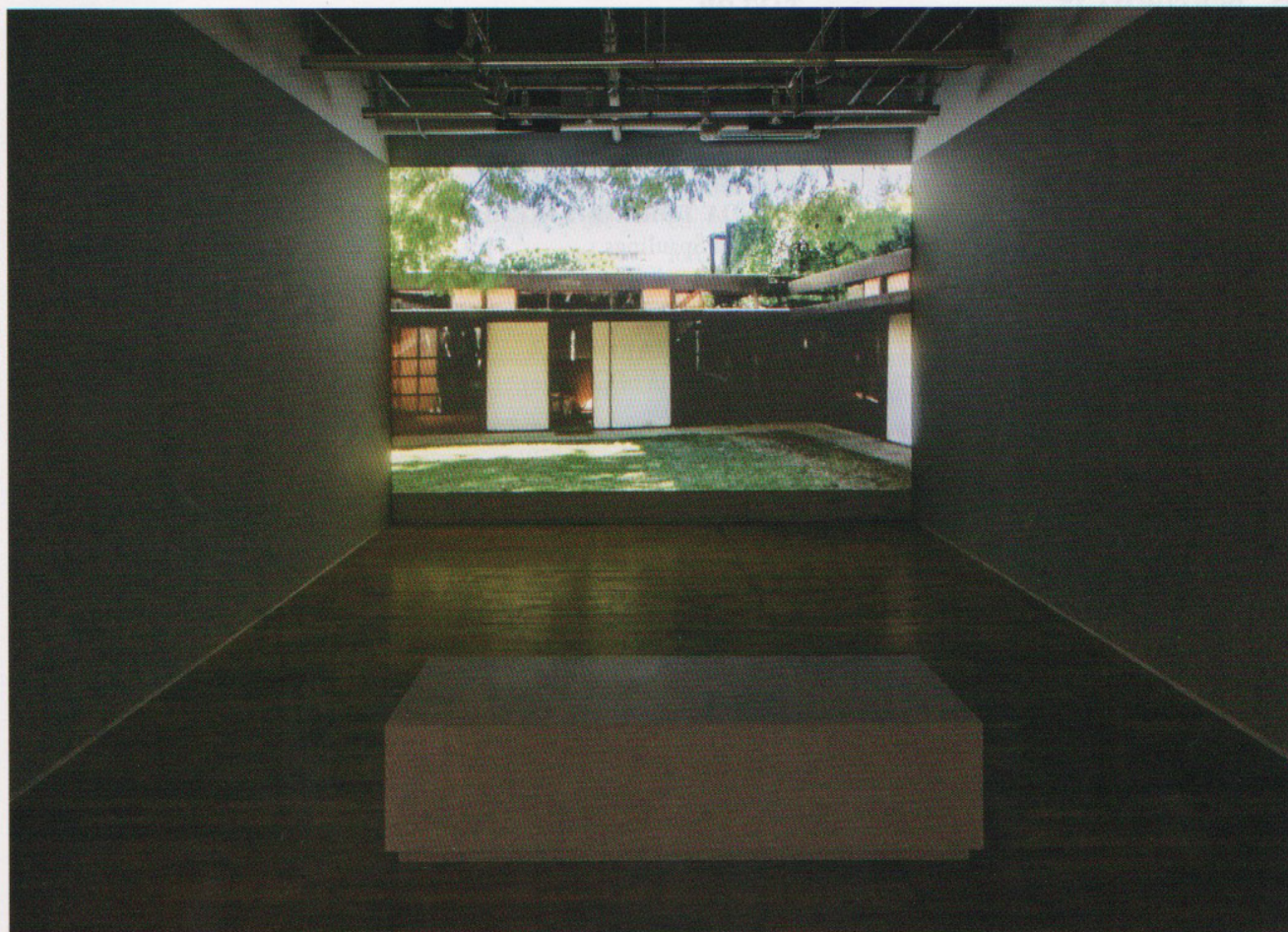
understanding. It's easy to be excited by lots of stuff, but it doesn't really mean much without that understanding.

SMITH How do digital technologies facilitate this deeper form of knowledge? Can they?

GREEN It's great to be able to have access to different libraries, catalogues, and databases. But what I find is that I always have to do the physical part of seeing something, of going to find something, because many things are not digitized. What actually has been digitized is almost random—it depends on someone's interest in a very specific subject. If you really start to go into certain areas, you find there are still lots of gaps and holes. This project involved quite a lot of physical research: going to Argentina, going to different libraries, museums, and sites in Buenos Aires, going to La Plata and visiting Casa Curutchet, exploring the special collections of Harvard's libraries, etc. I found things related to the experience of the people living in the La Plata house there, as well as documentation of the site of the Carpenter Center before Le Corbusier's building was constructed. Some of these objects are not digitized. They were analog.

SMITH Many critics have noted that your writing and your film scripts are heavy on citations of other authors. Is that where you start composing a text? With the citations?

GREEN Usually not. It happens differently. I'd say that my way of working is a way of perceiving living by respecting relays. Yes, there's writing and research, but also experiencing and perceiving, looking at the footage I've shot, or reviewing the materials I've found. And this conversation has reminded me how much writing I still have to do for this film! ○



Begin Again, Begin Again, 2015, digital film, 40 minutes. Courtesy Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, Toronto.