

# Engineering Tranquility

From a mischievous 'ghost ride' for Luna Park through to the 'film noir' blackness of a subterranean network, JENNIFER TURPIN works with the most unlikely of art materials, water.

**Surface:** "There is always a certain degree of trickery with water," Jennifer Turpin says with a wry smile. "My works play havoc with the notion of a large body of water. The water is broken up into such small components, a myriad of slow-flowing droplets that render insubstantial the whole physical element."

Turpin's artistic sleight of hand dramatizes natural processes in a theater of depth and surface, incorporating the element of water and the idea of darkness. Her curtains of water are weightless structures comprising barely visible threads, along which liquid descends in a continuous stream of tiny droplets.

Turpin's installations are the embodiment of multiple metaphors, and are as mutable as a bizarre pun. They oscillate in a kind of *temps perdu* between the demonstration of dangerous forces and a luminous suspension of normal bodily sensation. Turpin's five *Water Works* (1990-95) resembled action painting made concrete but subjected to the laws of hydraulics and gravity. The unpredictable, moving assemblage of chair, ladders, and flotation tanks, *Shifting Ground* (1988), was subjected to tidal forces which obsessively and energetically repeated themselves; their cycles had no end and no purpose. If reality were trapped in a continuous, fluid zone between mythology and history, then the flow of time would look like Turpin's installations.

**Noise:** Turpin's machines have an evident but inscrutable purpose that saves them from the quiescent, well-meaning funk of ecological art. They are simultaneously anthropomorphic and efficient, a characteristic shared with Rebecca Horn's constructions. Both artists present the machine as feminized, and their works are able to embody the impersonality of natural processes but elicit

By Charles Green

Portrait by Martin Kantor

uncomfortably sentimental emotions of wonder and amusement among viewers. Turpin's *Shifting Ground* was a device that transmitted movement from Sydney Harbor, underneath Pier 2/3 at Walsh Bay, upward through an elaborate apparatus of uprooted pine trees mounted on an old elevator cage, from which an arc of four ladders, cables and pulleys spread into the warehouse interior. As water levels in Sydney Harbor fluctuated, a flotation tank underneath the gallery space transmitted haptic and often violent oscillations along the pulleys and spasmodically moving ladders hinged to an old chair at the termination of Turpin's assemblage.

"It was nothing until the movement of the Harbor set the whole thing in motion. It was an amplification of what was going on beneath the building," Turpin says.

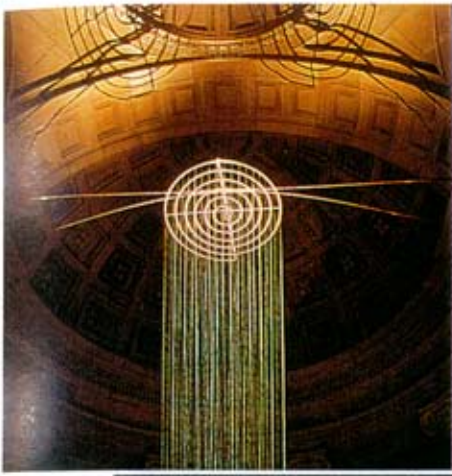
The differences between Horn and Turpin are derived from the centripetal motion of imperial history. Although Horn does not lay claim to European tradition in the way of her patriarchal peers, she is nevertheless clearly positioned at the center of First World artistic activity as a war-like usurper. Her works often involve violent displacement and shocking results, as, for example, in *High Moon* (1991), where rifles pointed at each other and fired blood-red liquid. Horn creates scandal, but Turpin avoids the consciousness of catharsis altogether: sensation, instead, occurs as a series of plateaus. The furniture's violent movement in *Shifting Ground* was both arbitrary and repetitively cyclical.

Avoiding crescendos, Turpin's webs of water neither begin nor end. Even though they are a colonization of each building, her *Water Works* are far from architecturally imperial: on the one hand, they disorient because the agency of light creates a more primary impression than that of water; on the other, their effect is substantial but ultimately intangible.

"They are their own cathedral," says Turpin of the *Water Works* installations. They cool their gallery spaces by several degrees and audiences experience a subtle but nonetheless noticeable



Water Works III 1991



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JENNIFER TURPIN



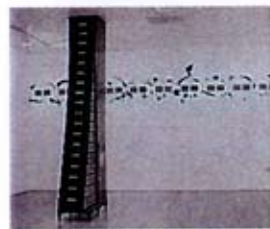
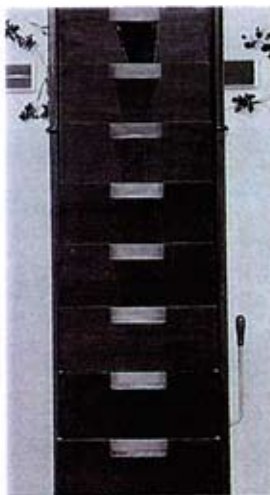
**Drawers of Water** 1990  
Installation for 'INLAND' at the Australian Center  
for Contemporary Art, Nov. 1990, Melbourne.  
(On wall behind, "After Color the Garden" by Siegfried Perle)

temperature drop upon entry. Even though they provide the impression of continuous harmonic motion, their expansive, spatial flow, like an enclosed waterfall, is disproportionately silent, as if the sense of hearing has been turned either off or up towards a white noise that resembles deafness. Turpin's watery curtains are screens through which the viewer can see the world as an extremely distanced glimpse: she feels that the *Water Works*' closest affinities are with moments in art history, and in particular with the landscapes of Nicholas Poussin and Claude, but "what I'm actually working out is how the fountains and water in European gardens and follies from the 16th century on actually worked – the mechanics and the artifice. I'm sure that the cultural language I'm using is classical in derivation."

Space becomes a cultural projection screen: her works' strongest affinities are with the aqueous medium of video and in particular, with the spellbinding video installations of Bill Viola.

The poignancy of Turpin's *Water Works* lies in our awareness that, at the edges of metropolitan desire, on the brink of another millennium, traditional metaphors of the body and its transcendence have become so unlikely that their reappearance is as exotic as it is unreliable. The unnerving mechanics of fluid in motion causes water to apparently defy gravity. If Turpin's liquid curtains offer this transcendent cultural memory, then *Shifting Ground* is the reverse – it mimics the vertiginous bodily sensation of a descent, like that of fallen angels from heaven.

**Darkness:** *In the Hoist Shaft* (1992) represents an altogether different type of architectural modification. The dominant effect of Turpin's earlier installations was an uncanny absence of loud sound in conjunction with the spectacle of impressive movement. Turpin's next installation, completed with architect James Grose as part of an exhibition of collaborations between Sydney artists and architects, provoked intense bodily awareness, especially of sound, through the contrivance of physical danger. *In the Hoist Shaft* seemed, at first inspection, to be a grid of black steel



## Avoiding crescendo

laid over a gap in the gallery floor. Standing over the grid, however, forced the perception of vertiginous space, propelling the senses of sight and sound into an abyss. The installation descended three levels from the gallery floor, through an old hoist shaft into the decrepit building (an old Bond Store warehouse). Like *Shifting Ground*, the piece involved both floor level and subterranean space, and thus only when the grid was traversed did the viewer, suspended over a darkened abyss, hear the sound of water falling to an almost imperceptibly lit pool.

The significance of water was again dual: first, water provided an opportunity to plumb the void through the activation of aural sensation; second, its invisibility underlined Turpin's deliberate elimination of the power of sight. The promotion of one sense (hearing, intimately linked to music) at the expense of another (sight, its absence linked to blindness) represented the intersection of two, apparently mutually exclusive, fantasies: that of

the harmonic allusiveness of visual images of music such as those of Giorgione; and, secondly, that of imprisonment and blindness as found in the terrible spaces of Giambattista Piranesi.

Turpin consistently places her installations inside old industrial buildings near the waterfront of Sydney, the city in which she lives, and they often seem to promise access to a much vaster body of water – the harbor – through hidden, subterranean passages. Turpin has proposed a project to install another *Water Works* in one of Sydney's enormous underground water-storage reservoirs, which were constructed towards the end of the last century.

"The grand scheme," she says, "was to have curtains of water parted, like the Art Gallery of New South Wales piece [*Water Works II*, 1991], but connecting every single one of the columns in the underground reservoir, suggesting a vast body of water through veils."

Dark netherworlds of storage and elimination underneath the modern metropolis have featured in photography, film, and painting, from Felix Nadar's 19th century photographs of Paris catacombs, onward through Carol Reed's post-war film noir, *The Third Man*, to Peter Weir's bizarre early production, *The Last Wave*. In all these instances, the underground was a place beyond the reference points of normal life as well as a separate, autonomous



# Turpin's webs of water neither begin nor end.

world characterized by constant movement. Nadar's 1861 Paris sewers are images of the rapid circulation of waste and the reticulation of the dead to new resting places. Vienna's sewers, in Reed's film, are the sites of corrupt negotiations, escapes, and mysteries. Turpin's installations are also characterized by their immediate replacement of normal experience with unfamiliar references and by their deployment of perpetual motion, the imagery of flight, and the perception of dark depths. Fittingly, Turpin is working on a project for the renovation of Sydney's Luna Park, which includes a "dark cave" ride.

**Depth:** Turpin's works stage ideas, but rather than transcribe thought, they present the work of natural processes as a play of artifice directed by a scenographer. Writer Edward Colless has proposed the term scenography in opposition to the normal engagement of installations with fact; Turpin's works, like those of Gordon Matta Clark and Pedro Cabrita Reis, are essentially scenic. Meaning is manufactured through suggestion because Turpin's motifs are submerged. The sculptural arcs of the *Water Works* are camouflaged by shimmering water droplets that hide precise dimensions and surfaces. Because of the attenuated motion of the drops, water even appears to flow upward; the ability of the viewer to discriminate between physical cause and false physics is blurred. Turpin displaces the properties of one element onto another and is attached to the ambiguity of certain physical phenomena – wave motion, surface tension, gravity.

Turpin's installations are literal embodiments of many metaphors found in discussions about art. They are motivated by a variety of representational problems. First, the multiplicity of their parts – seen, most obviously, in the webs of wire of the *Water Works* – is peculiar because of the parity of each constituent part and the absence of climactic drama. The *Water Works* are, in fact, composed of opaque signs entangled in a forest of transparent

moving artifice. Second, her installations don't exist to convey pragmatic information as does a map or a manifesto, even though they are essentially engineering diagrams come to life. Third, space traced with water, and the connection of architectural levels in *Shifting Ground* and *In the Hoist Shaft*, represent the inscription of a set of aesthetic desires.

The references are not to things represented (to the phenomenology of colonized spaces or to metaphorical bodies). Instead,



**Water Works IV** 1992, Annandale Galleries.

they refer to negotiations and protocols: water apparently floats upward; sculptural space becomes a theater in which real space is displaced by transparency. Turpin's subtle installations embody a visual refutation of the proposition that modern and postmodern art should acknowledge the opacity of representative acts – the mechanics of art can be invisible. Her works are both transparent and referential; they are gnostic counter-memories. 