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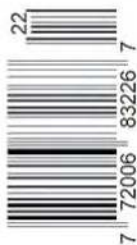
30
years

Etel Adnan—Marian Penner Bancroft—Noa Giniger
Chris Curreri—The Institute for Human Activities—Sarah Cale
Chiharu Shiota—Graeme Patterson—Glam North
Rabih Mroué—Akram Zaatari—Sharon Hayes—Damage Control

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Location



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18 Willow, Weep for Me:
Noa Giniger, Marian Penner
Bancroft, and the Intricacies
of Melancholy

by Kimberly Phillips

Marian Penner Bancroft, *Weeping willow and pond algae*,
Bulcamp House, Suffolk, U.K., 2012-2013
IMAGE COURTESY OF REPUBLIC GALLERY, VANCOUVER



In the winter of 2013, two solo exhibitions in Vancouver offered the image of a weeping willow (one moving, one still): Marian Penner Bancroft's *HYDROLOGIC (drawing up the clouds)* at Republic Gallery, and Noa Giniger's *Absolute Countdown* at the Western Front. The appearance of this distinctive tree – unmistakable for its majestic, pendulous boughs – within the terrain of Vancouver's art world, is somewhat akin to its station in the natural landscape. The weeping willow is not indigenous to either. Its existence is always the result of conscientious planting and cultivation, and in this way it is conspicuous, as much for its appearance as for its "mournful disposition."¹ There are, of course, numerous ways in which Penner Bancroft and Giniger differ in their concerns and modes of work. However, the choice of this tree – and the heavy affect with which it is so consistently bestowed² – seems an occasion to consider the presence of melancholy in each artist's broader practice, and their respective relationships to ephemerality, permanence, to the gravity of sentiment and, ultimately, to the complexity (and limits) of the image itself.

Noa Giniger, *Paper palm tree and a fan (stage 3)*, 2008
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Melancholy is undoubtedly the most lyrical of afflictions, variously described as an atmosphere of sorrow, the exquisite pleasure of longing, a sense of impending loss, or an endless, inexplicable waiting. A leaf through the index of the most "medical" of studies dedicated to the condition – Robert Burton's meandering, encyclopedic *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, first published in 1621 – suggests that a descent into melancholy could be brought upon by almost anything, from a bad love affair to a meal of beef.³ In the *sui generis* that is this tome, melancholy assumes the role of an open aperture through which all of human life and thought may be examined. By the time Sigmund Freud pathologized the condition in 1917, melancholy had long since detached itself from Burton's scholastic method. Its precise parameters, however, remained profoundly ambiguous.⁴ While healthy mourning is undertaken in order to come to terms with the loss of a knowable object, the psychoanalyst argues that "in melancholia the relation to the object is no simple one,"⁵ and in fact, the exact nature of loss for the melancholic may not be clear at all. "The patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia," he explains, "but only in

the sense that he knows *wobom* he has lost but not *wobat* he has lost in him."⁶ A defining feature of melancholy, then, appears to be the despondency that arises from an inability to define or *consciously access* that loss, or perhaps even from the anticipation and dread of loss, rather than from the experience of loss itself. (Indeed, it is not so difficult to imagine Freud thus afflicted, drafting "Mourning and Melancholia" as Europe descended into the war he feared would claim both his sons.)

The photograph's relationship to memory, loss, lived experience and place – as well as to the institutional apparatuses that structure our experience – has been a consistent motif throughout Marian Penner Bancroft's practice. Present in Vancouver's art community since she began to exhibit in the early 1970s, her work developed very much in relation to the critical debates around photography at that time. She approaches this medium as a descriptive system, one that is (like any language) partial and incomplete, and her images are often accompanied by textual and sonic elements, each obliquely informing the other. While she trains her camera on the natural landscape, her images picture the complexity of the social world – and particularly that which cannot be seen, but is palpably present nonetheless. A photograph, for example, may capture an expanse of lanky, sunbaked grass in Birtle, Manitoba, but what it records is a potent absence, that of the residential school which (we are informed through the title) once stood on this site. The image is made yet heavier still when we learn that the artist's maternal grandfather, a United Church minister, was once the school's principal. Drawn from a larger series, the silent horror of this work stems as much from photography's ineptitude at capturing anything other than a residue of our violent, colonialist past as it does from the ugliness of that past itself. What Penner Bancroft's undulating grasses suggest, then, is the melancholy of dwelling in proximity to this past, and the complexity of negotiating one's identity by way of a strata of histories that can never be changed nor directly confronted.

The particular sorrow triggered by a recognition of dwelling amidst the echo of past human destruction is perhaps nowhere more compellingly described than in the works of the late German writer W.G. Sebald. Part recollection, part fiction, his curious, enigmatic books are largely concerned with themes of memory, loss and decline, and are punctuated by indistinct black-and-white photographs, set in circuitous counterpoint to his narratives. One might argue that there is something distinctly Sebaldian about Penner Bancroft's entire body of work because of the way her images, too, insistently point to things outside their frame, and sullenly announce their own limits. That which is distant – time, place – has a tendency to fold back onto the present, hovering there unresolved and, to a great extent, inaccessible. Penner Bancroft's most recent work, *Boulevard* (2014), a commission by Vancouver's Contemporary Art Gallery for a downtown train station, illustrates this folding-over of time and place. A sequence of high-contrast translucent prints installed around two of the station's glass walls, *Boulevard* depicts a kaleidoscopic pattern of elm branches photographed along an historic Vancouver boulevard. Framed only by the winter sky, Penner Bancroft detaches the branches from the specificity of their locale, so that for the urban travellers who hurry past them, these images might conjure

the memory of other times and places as much as this one. In a similar way, Sebald ruminates as follows, writing in rural England but picturing Berlin of several decades past:

I may be standing at a window on the upper floor of our house, but what I see is not the familiar marshes and the willows thrashing as they always do, but rather, from several hundred yards up, acres and acres of allotment gardens bisected by a road, straight as an arrow, down which black taxi cabs speed out of the city in the direction of Wannsee.⁷

It is these spatial and temporal slippages that, in the work of both Sebald and Penner Bancroft, produce an exquisite, ungraspable sorrow, as well as the uncanny sense that we, as “survivors,” to quote Sebald again, “see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was.”⁸

With the exception of one, all the large-scale still photographs in *HYDROLOGIC* (*drawing up the clouds*) were captured in the Suffolk region of East Anglia, the same landscape Sebald traverses in his 1995 book *Die Ringe Des Saturn, Eines englische Wallfahrt* (“The Rings of Saturn: An English Pilgrimage”). This marshy, low-lying coastal landscape of reedbeds and peat fens is also the setting of Benjamin Britten’s mournful opera *Peter Grimes* (1945), a line from whose libretto (written by Montagu Slater) lends Penner Bancroft’s exhibition its subtitle. Indeed, a particular “hydro-logic” defines this place. Water underlies and connects everything (in the exhibition too: the still photographs, silent video projection *Nine Pictures* and accompanying letterpress text, as well as, more obliquely, the recordings of local sound, all describe the repeated and random motion of water, grass and trees from two sides of the planet.) The focus of each photograph is a single tree, so monumentalized by the image’s scale, composition, and impeccable clarity as to appear allegorized. Each betrays a particular pathology: an oak crippled – possibly decades ago – following a violent storm, another dead and bleached white, rooted in a saline marsh. And then there is the willow, magnificent and full, bent over a pond covered in algae

and starved of oxygen. For those in knowledge of its origins – native to eastern Asia, the willow found its way to Britain in the 18th century – the gravity of its imperialist past, concentrated so heavily in this place but nowhere visible, appears to pull the boughs of this tree lower still.⁹

Both Penner Bancroft and Giniger’s practices begin, in some way, from a careful and close looking at the observable world. But if Penner Bancroft’s work points to the aspect of melancholy that is about the exquisite pleasure/pain of living amidst a palpable, yet unreachable past, Giniger meditates on the passage of time in a different way. The Amsterdam-based Israeli artist works across a variety of media – installation, film, sculpture, text-, web-, and paper- based – and has developed a practice of quiet observances and interventions in the physical world, often so small as to be undetectable. An early video work, *Leaving Living* (2005), exemplifies her approach. In a nighttime *mise-en-scène* created by the artist, a structure in her hometown is decorated with a welcome mat, picket fence, and a motion-activated light garland strung about the façade. The building had long intrigued Giniger because of its minimalist, bunker-like appearance, and because it had never been inhabited.¹⁰ The camera, immobile throughout the video’s duration, is set on automatic focus and strains – as though human – to sharpen the minimal elements visible in the darkened field of view. Periodically, a vehicle passes, triggering the lights to illuminate for a limited time. The car, of course, does not choose its role, nor is it informed of the consequences of its act.¹¹ From the vehicle’s point of view, the structure is always illuminated. Only we as viewers are witness to the building’s “disappointment” when the car fails to stop. As the video continues, our expectations build and then drop, and we anthropomorphize the building more and more, rooting for its “hopes” for fulfillment, all

Noa Giniger, still from *The Sorrow Brings Joy* (backstage), 2013, 35mm film transferred to HD, sound, 05:57

PHOTO: MICHAEL LOVE
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



TOP:
Noa Giniger, *NOON*, 2009, archival pigment print, 100 cm x 150 cm
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

BOTTOM:
Noa Giniger, *Leaving Living*, 2005, still from video installation, 10:30 loop
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



the while aware of the triviality and futility of our investment.

Chance factors largely in Giniger's works; *NOON* (2009), for example, is what she calls a "found scene": twin clock towers on a Berlin church, the left reading one minute after the hour and the right one minute before. Discovered fortuitously while walking through the city, Giniger returned with a film camera at midday.¹² For the artist, the ephemeral is rooted in the unbending structures of the universe: gravity and time. Rather than a perpetual looping of time and space (as in Penner Bancroft's work), there is a pull towards things with a limited lifespan, which occur amidst the relentless entropic procession – a condition within which we all exist, and which Giniger terms "absolute countdowns."

Absolute Countdown, Giniger's first solo exhibition in Canada, included a web work by the same name,¹³ a five-minute film¹⁴ (transferred to video) titled *The Sorrow the Joy Brings*, as well as a single, diminutive collage. Each work was envisioned as equal to the other,¹⁵ but the presentation's commanding focus was the film, which recorded the end point of a multi-year project realizing Giniger's desire to quite literally "lift the spirits" of a weeping willow. The artist's journey towards this eventual filming (shot on location in Vancouver) is archived on her blog *And Gravity Will Always Bring Us Down*,¹⁶ which chronicles the entirety of the project, from its beginnings as a simple sketch exploring the possibility of lifting a willow tree's boughs with the force of air. The blog follows Giniger's research, including conversations with experts in the fields of neurology, vision and psychology, and is punctuated by collage works inverting the willow's "natural" disposition by a simple act of cutting and flipping so that the trees' foliage points upwards with a manic energy.

Noa Giniger, still from *The Sorrow the Joy Brings*, 2013, 35 mm film transferred to HD, sound, 5:57
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



The most elaborate of Giniger's interventions to date, *The Sorrow the Joy Brings* saw a 17-person production crew traipse pilgrimage-like to a suburban farm where the chosen willow was located, armed with nine very powerful wind machines, sourced through Vancouver's film industry.¹⁷ The gesture was a profoundly romantic one, perhaps most poignantly because the film records an act that is, in the end, underwhelming. After five minutes of roaring sound, with the crew visible scuttling beneath the wind-blown boughs, the willow appears hardly to shrug. One by one the fans are shut down, leaving the tree to settle in resolute silence. The film rolls on and, after a time, a plane crosses overhead, cruelly oblivious to our disappointment. The weeping willow will not be cheered.

Of course, as Giniger has stated, the point was never to triumph.¹⁸ This might well have been achieved with digital manipulation. The colossal discrepancy between the energy brought to this act (along with the expectations produced) and its less-than-spectacular results serves to question the nature of what we consider "success," and points to the instability of both anticipation and sentimentality, as well as the absurd logic through which we organize and anthropo-

morphize a whole system of affective states. Unlike Penner Bancroft's photographs, which place us elegiacally within an oscillating present/past, Giniger's acts leave us longing for a future that might never come, and anticipating an end that is ultimately, and beautifully, disappointing.

In their clarity and splendour (and in a nod to the fabled promises of the medium), Marian Penner Bancroft's photographs seduce with the promise of some communicative fulfillment but ultimately (if lyrically) stop short. They are melancholic in their desire for a connection to a past, in their tracing of distance, both temporal and geographic, and in their acknowledgement of humanity's capacity for both connectivity and destruction, which seems to course beneath everything, like water. For Noa Giniger, the gesture itself, whether brought about by happenstance or an intricate choreography, betrays the futility of these desires. In the work of both, the things pictured – living or otherwise – are there in full understanding of the affect we'll bestow upon them. But ultimately an object can really only ever reveal our investments in it, never itself. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, "the thing holds itself aloof from us and remains self-sufficient...a resolutely silent Other."¹⁹ The object (or image) will not speak, or even point the way. To this, these artists respond from two sides, perhaps, of the same sadness: with the longing for a past that can never be recuperated, and the yearning for a future that will never come. ✨

✧ **Kimberly Phillips** is a Vancouver-based writer and curator. She holds a PhD in art history from the University of British Columbia and regularly teaches courses on contemporary visual art and curatorial practices at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. She is Director/Curator of *Access Gallery*, an artist-run centre committed to supporting the work of emergent artists and experimental practices.

Endnotes

- 1 Mandy Kirkby, *A Victorian Flower Dictionary: The Language of Flowers Companion* (London: Ballantine Books, 2011), 159.
- 2 The *salix babylonica* is a species of willow tree whose popular name is describes as "weeping" in many languages: הייבויב הברית in Hebrew, *saule pleureur* in French, *Trauerweide* in German, *sauce llorón* in Spanish, *плакучка* in Russian.
- 3 Burton, Robert, *The Anatomy of Melancholy, What it is: With all the Kinds, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostickes, and Several Cures of it. In Three Maine Partitions with their several Sections, Members, and Subsections. Philosophically, Medicinally, Historically, Opened and Cut Up*, 16th edition (London: B Blake, 1836).
- 4 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 237–258.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 256.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 245.
- 7 W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions Books, 1998), 179–80.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 125.
- 9 Conversation with the artist, March 31, 2014, Vancouver, British Columbia.
- 10 Email correspondence with the artist, April 10, 2014.
- 11 See <http://noa-giniger.tumblr.com/>
- 12 Email correspondence with the artist, April 10, 2014.
- 13 <http://www.absolutecountdown.com/>
- 14 Giniger's choice of medium was itself melancholic, as the number of facilities capable of developing the 35mm film dwindled even as the project unfolded. See Giniger's blog, <http://the-sorrow-the-joy-brings.tumblr.com/>
- 15 A note about the installation itself: within the gallery at the Western Front, the spatial location of the collage (which might be understood as the "ideal," with the willow's inverted boughs) and the film (the reality) was highly calculated. Positioned on opposite walls, facing one another, the two works could not be experienced simultaneously. Email correspondence with the artist, April 10, 2014.
- 16 <http://the-sorrow-the-joy-brings.tumblr.com/>
- 17 The artist noted that these fans were designed to blow air horizontally across film sets to simulate windy conditions. They had never before been tested to point vertically upwards into trees.
- 18 Email correspondence with the artist, April 7, 2014.
- 19 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1989), 322.

Marian Penner Bancroft, *Oak rooted in saline reedbed, Snape Maltings, Suffolk, U.K.*, 2012-2013, C-print, 101.6 cm x 101.6 cm
IMAGE COURTESY OF REPUBLIC GALLERY, VANCOUVER

