

Artist Profile: Joe Winter

[Ceci Moss](#) | Tue Jan 31st, 2012 7:03 a.m.



The Stars Below, 2011. Mixed media installation

One thing I like about your work is the fact that you seem to operate like a hacker, taking things apart, finding new ways to misuse technology. But throughout your approach appears to be deliberately poetic, wherein you bring out these singular moments of beauty. For example, when you first started working on your scanner films during a residency at the MacDowell Colony, you mentioned that you began by simply placing a scanner outside of your cabin at night. The footage became a kind of accidental biological study, as the scanner intrigued light-seeking moths and other bugs, resulting in a time-lapsed nighttime sample of the various critters in the forest. I'm wondering if you can comment on how you "hack" technology in your work, and what you hope to achieve in that process. Are you guided by a kind of poetic hacking? How so?

In most of my works that involve a technological device (printer, scanner, photocopier, etc.) the technology itself is actually fairly un-altered. I tend to adjust the context in which the object is placed, or introduce variables or conditions that exist outside what I might

call the area of expertise of the device. To use your example of the scanner: whether I'm scanning documents or moths in the woods, the scanner is still executing its function in exactly the same way; I've simply adjusted the expected input. I'm interested in looking at a given system and seeing what else it has the potential to speak about aside from its narrow band of acceptable usage, and how its native landscape (office, classroom, computer lab) might be related to other sorts of spaces, systems, or sets of ideas.

Since you brought up the topic of systems, I'm wondering if you could discuss that further. How do you approach the notion of "system" in your work? How do you reveal the presence of these systems, is it simply an act of mimesis or a disturbance or something else?

At different moments, I might describe my work in terms of systems, structures, frameworks, rules, and/or devices. I think there are a few things at play for me on that page of the thesaurus. The first is that I am always looking for various sorts of engines to move a project forward. Just like a physical device I take up may immediately describe a set of material and procedural constraints, I'll often involve a secondary framework--south polar exploration, the history of astronomy--that will both move a material system beyond itself and help to select supporting materials, an installation's logic, etc. The second is developing a relationship between the system immediately at *work* and the secondary framework through a third, usually less visible system. To use my recent piece, [*The Stars Below*](#), as an example: I first developed the material process. A series of solenoid valves release drips of water onto upright sticks of chalk, slowly eroding them. The secondary framework--an installation space suggesting something between an office and a classroom--arises from the materials involved (what is the domain of a stick of chalk? Where does this drip of water originate?) and provides a context in which to situate the erosive activity. Between these two things is a conception of Deep Time, of which slate and chalk are both products, which complicates the scales of time at play within institutional spaces. So, the work tries to establish a series of interrelations between a set of materials, landscapes, and ideas. In short, a system. Whether or not the audience is able to unravel all of that immediately is not as important to me as their awareness that there is a sense of order, an underlying logic at work.

I feel that in your work you abuse technology not only to see that technology anew in itself, but also so that we, as viewers interacting with that technology, can see the world through it in a different way. Towards this end, the viewer's perception is always a key component for you, such as in [*Xerox Astronomy and the Nebulous Object-Image Archive*](#) (2008), which, using a strange configuration of a cubicle, a photocopier, and numerous mechanical lamps, produces Xerox copies that closely resemble telescopic images of outer space. How does perception factor into your practice, and how does this relate to your approach to technology?

I am often thinking about modes of viewership that provide alternatives, foils, stand-ins, or compliments to looking at objects and images in an exclusively art context. These modes

could be scientific, commercial, historical, info-graphical. There are different frames that get erected around objects and images in different contexts, and I'm interested in things that slip between these frames. I got serious about researching and thinking about astronomy when I started to transition from making sound-based works to ones in which the visual is more central. Considering stars and planets requires extreme conceptions of space and scale (so in that way astronomy is super-sculptural, especially material) but for thousands of years our knowledge about them came exclusively through looking (more recently, of course, we have non-visual approaches, radio telescopes, etc.). So, the history of astronomy seems like a case study in the impulse to look deeper, further. People initially saw the sky as a planar surface because that's the way it more or less looks. Contemporary viewers project a current-day understanding of cosmic space onto that flatness, and so we perceive deep space. We are basically imagining something we can't actually see whenever we look up. The variable distance between direct sensory experience and all the non-sensory layers that go on top of that, that shape our interpretation of objects and events really interests me, especially when this received knowledge doesn't cleanly align with our own perceptions.

It seems your fascination with technology is deeply routed to your parallel interest in scientific inquiry – an aspect apparent in your recent exhibition “[The Stars Below](#)” at the Kitchen in New York City. The solo exhibition centered around the piece *The Stars Below* (2011) which replicated staple artifacts from the science classroom, complete with a dry erase board and fluorescent lighting. Like *Xerox Astronomy and the Nebulous Object-Image Archive* (2008), you seem to be turning the assumed certainty of scientific objectivity upside down, through the appropriation of its tools and ephemera. Can you say more about this thread within your practice?

As an undergraduate, I started off studying biology and geology, then switched to history before settling on a program of art and technology. Those first three disciplines continue to inform and inspire my work in the studio. At the first, and most superficial level, the perceived objectivity of scientific investigation would seem to provide a foil for the more fluid and subjective frameworks associated with art making and viewership. Looking a bit more carefully at the history and philosophy of science reveals that scientists with at least a touch of historical perspective readily admit the limitations of a given theoretical framework, and that current science represents a selection of the best available models. That is, a given theoretical model is only true insofar as it conforms to current observations and does the best job of predicting future outcomes. Scientific theories are constantly being revised, and get completely tossed out when and if something better comes along. So, the history of science is full of radical transformations in how we look at and think about the world. I find the possibility of these shifts, and the way science is ideologically equipped to incorporate (even encourage) them within its seemingly strict framework incredibly inspiring. I think my interest in this structural flexibility and these transformations in thinking probably explains why I tend to make my materials (technological and otherwise) operate as more than one thing at once, or operate within more than one intellectual framework at a time.

Some of your works, such as [...a History of Light](#) (2011) and [Printershake](#) (2007-2008), concentrate on light and the fabrication of color – how color comes to be under certain limitations, technological, scientific, historical, etc. I'm wondering if you can talk more about the use of color in your practice.

I have a hard time choosing colors. Lately, the objects I've been making are intended to appear as some kind of institutional (and therefore impersonal) artifacts, so seeming color preferences undermine that to me. I try to avoid thinking about individual colors in favor of color options in a given scenario. So of course, like many artists, I am drawn to pre-selected color palettes, and often the raw systems that produce colors in a given scenario. My working process is really material-centric, so I tend to deal with colors that are, or at least come close to feeling "native" to a given material. Another way of putting this is that I typically work with "found" color palettes, which lately could be the colors in a variety pack of construction paper, or the available colors of dry erase markers. So maybe yes, each set of materials I deal with has its own particular rainbow. The work I am starting to think about now has one foot in interior decorating, and I am starting to think about something we like to call taste as a kind of foil or anti-system to scientific methodology, so color choice is an issue I am going to be confronting head on pretty soon. I'm looking forward to collecting swatches.

Sound is another important component for you – and it seemed to be a major focus especially while you were in graduate school at UCSD. During that time, you built a mobile modified piano called the [Myano](#) (2003-2006) that you would perform around the city of San Diego, as well as the installation [One ship encounters a series of notable exceptions](#) (2006) which was an experiment in sculptural storytelling wherein you recounted a narrative detailing the passage of ships through polar waters in an elaborate, sonified acrylic sculpture. How do you approach sound in your work?

When I first started working with sound, I was drawn to its immediacy, its physical impact on the body, and its ability to invisibly fill and transform space. I am not working with sound so much lately, but I think it has been useful to me as a material that bridges a kind of structural, analytic framework (i.e., acoustics, western systems of tonality, etc.) with a visceral non-lingual experience. This aspect of sound is similar to how I have been thinking about astronomy and the sky more recently. A musical instrument (like the piano) is a perfect example of a system that presents itself with a specific set of behaviors, inputs and outputs that it expects, that others expect about it. I think there is not much of a leap between engaging (bending) the rules of a piano and the rules of a printer or photocopier. All of these things come pre-loaded with a prescribed set of activities and implications, which, for me, prime a terrain for investigation.

**Age:**

30

Location:

Long Island City, NY

How long have you been working creatively with technology? How did you start?

I think I had a penchant for science and engineering style toys as a kid. Legos, Capsela, chemistry sets. I remember being in some kind of computer club in the 5th or 6th grade where I spent my lunchtime programming with LOGO. I made my first website (on AOL!) using HTML when I was in junior high.

Describe your experience with the tools you use. How did you start using them?

I don't have a standard set of tools that I am always using. I like to be able to do everything myself, and this has led me to try to acquire new skills as I need them, which typically involves consulting people who know more than me, tutorials online, and a lot of trial and error in the studio. In one of my first sound performances, I wired a bunch of

telephones and mini-speakers together in such a way that smoke came out of the headphone jack of my laptop. No one believed me, but I had the scorch mark to prove it. This led me to learn something about resistance, which set me on the path of learning just a little bit about electronics. I took two computer-programming classes in college, which have enabled me to muddle through well enough with whatever new languages and programming interfaces have appeared in the intervening years. A lot of the sculptural fabrication-related skills I acquired in grad school under the guidance of a truly excellent facilities/shop manager, but I am always using new materials and trying to figure out how to work with them as I develop new work.

Where did you go to school? What did you study?

I received my Bachelor's degree at Brown University in New Media Studies and my MFA in Visual Art from University of California, San Diego.

What traditional media do you use, if any? Do you think your work with traditional media relates to your work with technology?

I use a lot of materials in my work, and they tend to be fairly integrated. Personally, I don't really respect any division between those that might be considered traditional and those that are more clearly technological.

Are you involved in other creative or social activities (i.e. music, writing, activism, community organizing)?

I've curated a few small exhibitions and have done some writing in relation to them. Thinking and writing about other artists' work is sometimes a productive way to deal with ideas that interest me that aren't necessarily directly applicable to what I happen to be making in the studio at a given moment.

What do you do for a living or what occupations have you held previously? Do you think this work relates to your art practice in a significant way?

I've been teaching undergraduates for the last five years. When I first moved to New York, I worked in an office full time for about three months, and since then have worked on-and-off part time in a similar setting. It's probably obvious that my experience in various institutional environments has had a heavy influence on my work of the last five years.

Who are your key artistic influences?

I am drawn to radical investigations of form, deep sensitivity to material, and compulsively pitched humor. I had formative experiences as a student with the work of OULIPO writers like Raymond Queneau and George Perec and composers like John Cage and Alvin Lucier. Some films that inspire me include Peter Greenaway's *The Falls* and

Vertical Features Remake, Jacques Tati's *Playtime*, and Charles Atlas' *Hail the New Puritan*. Sculptors I can get behind include Mark Manders, Cosima Von Bonin, Ester Partegas, and Charles Ray.

Have you collaborated with anyone in the art community on a project? With whom, and on what?

A few years ago, I collaborated with Zerek Kempf on an artist book published by Onestar Press. My partner--Adam Shecter—and I started a project called [2-UP](#) in 2010. As a collective of artists and writers, 2-UP produces a series of double-sided posters, each of which is a collaboration between two members of the collective. The project is completely funded by dues from its members, enabling us to give away the posters for free at events around the city. The project is also supported by a group of subscribers who receive the posters by mail. We're just starting our second series of posters in January 2012.

Do you actively study art history?

You are much more likely to find me reading other kinds of history: intellectual history, cultural history, history of science and technology, or just plain history. I read art history more selectively, based on recommendation or relation to a particular project I am thinking about, but it's not a section of the library or bookstore I find myself casually browsing.

Do you read art criticism, philosophy, or critical theory? If so, which authors inspire you?

There are certain authors in this vein that I keep floating around (Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Manuel DeLanda) and return to every once in a while, but criticism/theory /philosophy is not necessarily a place to which I am naturally drawn. In addition to the areas I mentioned above, I read a fair amount of fiction. I find novels inspiring in a lot of ways, both in terms of formal innovation (I often think of novels as sculptures), and also as a way to balance my analytic tendencies with a hefty dose of the imaginary. The contemporary authors that inspire me include Steve Erickson, John Crowley, and Ursula K. Leguin.

Are there any issues around the production of, or the display/exhibition of new media art that you are concerned about?

I think this is mostly a problem for curators, but I'll say that of works that involve technology, I am most interested in those that are aware of and actively make meaning out of their technological infrastructure.

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