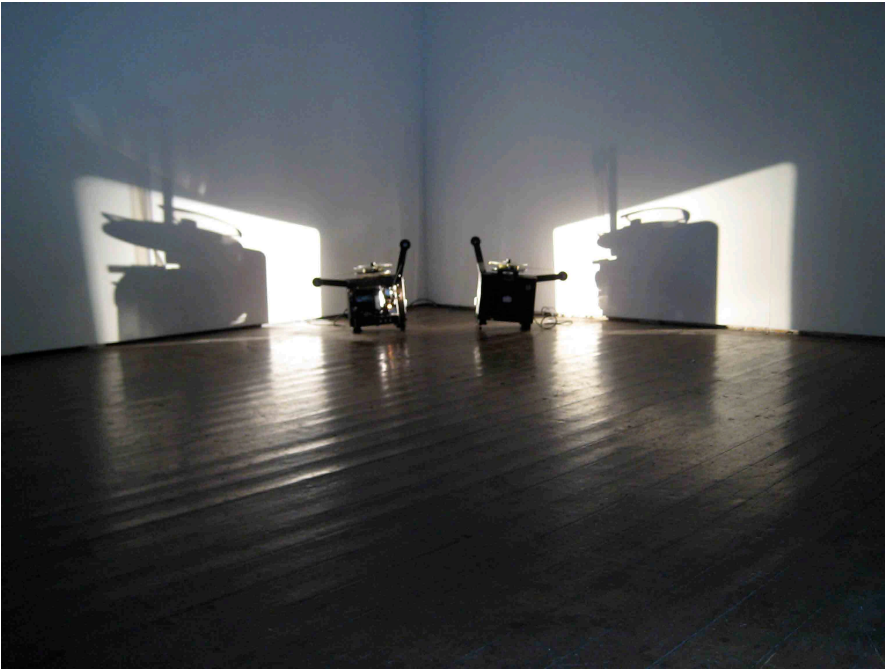


CONTEMPORARYARTMUSEUMSTLOUIS



Western Round Table, 2007. Two 16mm films, two projectors, two loops, optical sound. Installation view, LUX, London, 2009. Courtesy the artist; carlier | gebauer, Berlin; and Giò Marconi, Milan. © Rosa Barba

Rosa Barba: Desert—Performed is organized by the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and curated by Kelly Shindler, Assistant Curator.





Rosa Barba: Desert—Performed

The work of Rosa Barba makes unconventional and inventive use of cinematic effects, mediums, and modes of presentation. Her installations and objects engage essential filmic components such as celluloid, projection, light, and sound to consider historical narratives and explore geographical locations while heightening our awareness of film's material properties. *Rosa Barba: Desert—Performed* is her first solo exhibition in a museum in the United States and demonstrates the breadth of the artist's practice in film, sculpture, and writing. It also marks the American debut for a series of works focusing on California's Mojave Desert.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is the 35mm film presentation, *The Long Road* (2010). Installed in CAM's Performance Space, the work transforms this large public atrium, located at the heart of the museum, into a temporary cinema. Its title is derived from an abandoned racetrack that the artist found in the Mojave Desert as well as Robert Creeley's eponymous 1996 poem. The racetrack is a prime example of

Barba's interest in "how documents are left in landscapes"; a sign inscribed in the earth, it is visible from both ground and sky.¹ Once a site of time-sensitive activity, this particular racetrack, no longer in use, is gradually being absorbed back into its dusty environment. Barba underscores the melancholic setting with a recording of Creeley reading his poem, in which he contemplates the twilight of one's own life, "an explosion / of emptiness soon forgotten."² An original score by her frequent collaborator, Jan St. Werner of the German electronic band Mouse on Mars, further dramatizes the otherworldly sense of the piece. In the space of the exhibition, site, sound, and image loop indefinitely to suggest this long road as connoting not only sport but also larger notions of time, history, and culture.

The exhibition includes two other works based in the Mojave Desert. *Waiting Grounds* (2007) is a silent 16mm film rear-projected onto a Plexiglas screen suspended in the center of the gallery. It alludes to weapons tests and personnel training that the American military has conducted in the Mojave

Desert for decades through footage of various sites that, like the racetrack in *The Long Road*, have since been abandoned. The film alternates imagery of discarded remains—the hood of an RV trailer, old mattresses, empty bunker-like structures—with shots of a nearly vacant desert landscape. The quiet composition of the different settings (in which the contents of the desert are documented as though on display) resembles that of still-life paintings or photographs. Their contemplative yet foreboding tone is exaggerated by the appearance of intertitles (or individual text cards) on the screen. An original script by Barba, the text characterizes the sites as left over from a bygone era: “places playing places.”³ In its combination of actual locations and found objects with an invented narrative, *Waiting Grounds* can be read as both archaeological artifact and science fiction.

Western Round Table (2007) also considers activities in the desert, but in a more ambiguous fashion. Two 16mm projectors face each other on the gallery floor, projecting shadows cast by clear leader (or blank film) onto the wall. The soundtrack is constructed from both the empty celluloid and excerpts from various twentieth-century film scores and electronic avant-garde musical compositions. The work’s title references an alleged 1949 meeting in the Mojave Desert preceding the historic Western Round Table on Modern Art, in which a group of cultural luminaries, including artist Marcel Duchamp (French, 1887–1968), architect Frank Lloyd Wright (American,

1867–1959), and the composer Arnold Schönberg (Austrian, 1874–1951), met to discuss the history and future of modernism. In Barba’s reenactment of the encounter, projectors assume the roles of the round table participants, “speaking” to each other and engaging in their own lively discussion. In the installation, we may recognize some of the melodies that we hear but the work restricts us from discerning any true meaning. Thus, its pointed abstraction conveys the exclusivity of the conversation as well as the futility of attempting to capture such an unfixed moment in history.

Two sculptural pieces complement Barba’s desert works. *Invisible Act* (2010) concentrates on the kinetic qualities of cinema itself. In the piece, Barba connects a strip of blank film leader from a 16mm projector to the gallery wall, essentially creating her own modified looping mechanism. A small silver ball balances atop the film as it continually feeds through the projector’s sprockets. She has painted the film in several places so that on occasion, frames of bright color project onto the wall. Like tightrope walking, the work is an exercise in creating the perfect tension between the ball, moving celluloid, and projection beam. The resulting shadow play is as experiential as viewing any live performance. *I Made a Circuit and Then a Second Circuit* (2010) is closely related to *The Long Road*, a sort of textual equivalent to the latter’s ovoid racetrack and looping projection format. The work consists of a large, tapestry-sized piece of black felt, out of which

CONTEMPORARYARTMUSEUMSTLOUIS

Barba has cut the letters from a text. The prose only becomes legible when the beam of a spotlight illuminates the absent letters, as though the object was a modern-day illuminated manuscript. Akin to *Waiting Grounds*, its tone is distinctly science fiction-inflected and involves a non-linear exploration of semiotics (the study of signs) and our ongoing attempts to make sense of the ineffable over time. The work therefore unravels the given definition of a circuit as a closed loop to posit something entirely more unresolved.

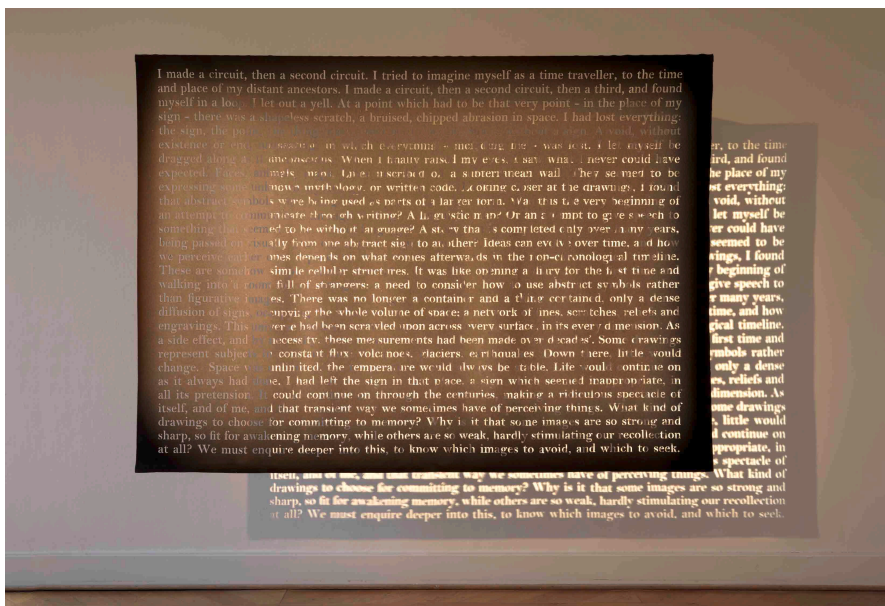
The title of the exhibition, "Desert—Performed," references the recurring presence of the desert in Barba's oeuvre and the performative nature of both the desert (as a site where events take place) and the artworks

themselves. Her installations are in constant motion: projectors rattle, celluloid creeps along, soundtracks buzz, images flash, and beams of light dance in the gallery. We viewers are also performers. Barba invites us to enter into the exhibition space, engage the works, and physically circumnavigate them where possible. Considered as a whole, the works in this presentation evince not only the richness of the desert as a site of artistic inspiration but also Barba's ability to enact stories in real time, thereby transforming the space of cinema into that of live theater.

1 "TateShots: Rosa Barba," Tate Modern (October 8, 2010), accessed June 27, 2012, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/current-exhibition-rosa-barba>.

2 Robert Creeley, "The Long Road," in *Life and Death* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1998), 72.

3 Rosa Barba, *Waiting Grounds*, 2007. 16mm film, color, silent, 4 minutes.



I Made a Circuit and Then a Second Circuit, 2010. Cutout text on felt, spotlight, 71 x 94½ inches. Courtesy the artist; carlier | gebauer, Berlin; and Gió Marconi, Milan. © Rosa Barba