

SOUND SPEED MARKER

Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler

28 February – 10 August 2014

Ballroom Marfa is pleased to present *Sound Speed Marker* by Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler. The three video installations and related photographs, covering a span of five years of work, explore film's relationship to place and the traces that movie making leaves behind. The exhibition includes the premiere of *Giant* (2014), a work commissioned by Ballroom Marfa. The exhibition will be on view at Ballroom Marfa until August 10, 2014 and will be accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue to be published in December 2014. *Sound Speed Marker* will travel to the Irish Museum of Modern Art in December 2014 and the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston in May 2015 in May 2015.

Grand Paris Texas (2009) considers the physical and social space of a dead movie theater, a forgotten song and the inhabitants of a small town. The Grand Theater, an abandoned, pigeon-filled movie theater in downtown Paris, serves as the protagonist in a narrative that explores Paris as a meta-location constructed through celluloid and soundtrack. *Grand Paris Texas* connects three seminal movies of the Southwest: Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas* (1984), Bruce Beresford's *Tender Mercies* (1983), and King Baggot's classic silent film, *Tumbleweeds* (1925).

In *Movie Mountain (Méliès)* (2011), Hubbard/Birchler explore the site of a mountain in the Chihuahuan Desert near the town of Sierra Blanca. The project generates several narrative strands that interweave memory and forgetting. *Movie Mountain (Méliès)* features a script-writing cowboy as well as local residents whose relatives performed in an original silent picture filmed at the mountain. The project also encounters a possible link between Movie Mountain and Gaston Méliès, the brother of famous filmmaker George Méliès.

Giant (2014) interweaves signs of life and vistas of a decaying movie set built outside of Marfa: the Reata mansion from the 1956 Warner Bros. film, *Giant* starring Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson and James Dean. After filming was completed the three-sided facade was left behind in the landscape. Hubbard/Birchler explore the skeletal remains of the set as seasons change, day turns to night and parts of the structure swing and fall off. Scenes of a film crew recording the current conditions are juxtaposed with a Warner Bros. office in 1955, where a secretary types up the location contract for the motion picture that has yet to be created.

Teresa Hubbard, born in Dublin, Ireland 1965 and Alexander Birchler, born in Baden, Switzerland 1962 have been working collaboratively in video, photography and sculpture since 1990. Their work is held in numerous private and public collections including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D. C.; Kunstmuseum Basel; Kunsthaus Zurich; Modern Art Museum Fort Worth; Museum of Fine Arts Houston; Yokohama Museum of Art and the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich. Work in this exhibition appears courtesy of Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin.

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It is part of Ballroom Marfa's mission to enable artwork that would be impossible to realize elsewhere. This project – with its roots in the landscape that we call home – brings Hubbard/Birchler's trilogy to a close, and clarifies Ballroom Marfa's role as an organization committed to commissioning new work.

Sound Speed Marker and its programs have been made possible by the generous support of Aargauer Kuratorium, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, The Brown Foundation, Inc.; L & M Charitable Foundation, Inc.; The Moody Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, and Texas Commission on the Arts.

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Giant was commissioned by Ballroom Marfa.

Grand Paris Texas was commissioned by the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

Movie Mountain (Méliès) was created with generous support of the Alturas Foundation.

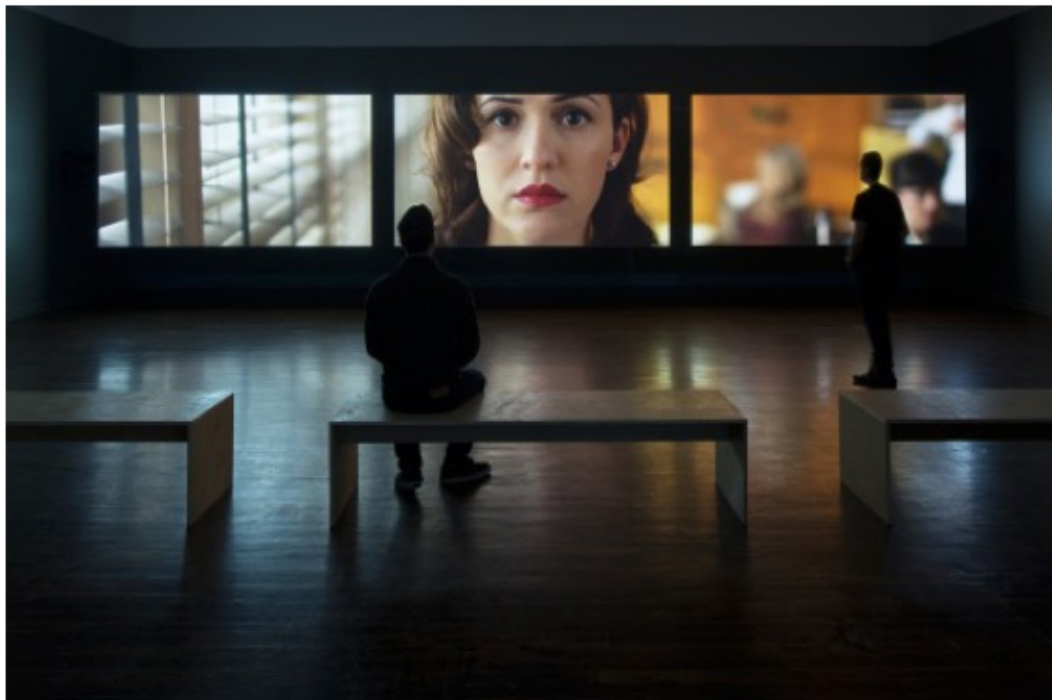
• AARGAUER •
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BLOG

April 4, 2014

IN CONVERSATION WITH TERESA HUBBARD AND ALEXANDER BIRCHLER



Giant. Image by Fredrik Nilsen.

During the second month of Hubbard/Birchler's exhibition, *Sound Speed Marker*, Ballroom Marfa's intern, Francesca Altamura, spoke with the artist duo about the works featured in the exhibition, comprising of three films, nine photographs and an installation located in the courtyard.

Teresa Hubbard, born in Dublin, Ireland 1965 and Alexander Birchler, born in Baden, Switzerland 1962 have been working collaboratively in video, photography and sculpture since 1990. The exhibition *Sound Speed Marker* will be on view at Ballroom Marfa until July 31, 2014, traveling next to the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland in December 2014 and the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston, Texas in May 2015.

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Francesca Altamura: How would you describe the three featured video works, *Grand Paris Texas* (2009), *Movie Mountain (Méliès)* (2011) and *Giant* (2014) to viewers who may not have been introduced to your work before?

Alexander Birchler: There are three video installations, a trilogy, presented at Ballroom, including the premiere of *Giant* which was commissioned by Ballroom Marfa. All three works explore, in different ways, the physical and social traces that movies and movie making leaves behind.

FA: How has living in Austin, influenced the direction of your current, and future, works?

Teresa Hubbard: We've lived and worked in many places and we've moved around a lot over the time we've known each other — different cities and towns in Canada, Switzerland, Germany and the United States. During the past decade that we've been primarily based in Austin, we've gotten close to a number of people who are also based in Austin, and they work with us during the research phase, on location and in post production. These are long-term relationships which we really appreciate and have become such an important part of our community.

FA: What was your initial intrigue with the films *Paris, Texas* and *Giant* (1956)? Do these films evoke a sense of nostalgic reminiscence for you both?

AB: Both of us, as teenagers growing up in different parts of the world, (me in Switzerland, Teresa in Australia) saw the movie, *Paris, Texas* by Wim Wenders. In my case, I had no idea about an "image" of Texas when I saw *Paris, Texas*, the film. Apparently Wenders looked for the "image" of Texas and didn't find it in Paris. But he had a very specific idea about what he wanted and he created it somewhere else. Our work, *Grand Paris Texas* started because we were curious about the actual town of Paris, Texas. We wanted to explore the town that is known because its name is the title of a famous movie. When we arrived there, we did what we do in pretty much every town, we went to see what the cinema looked like.

We've been photographing movie theater façades for a number of years (the photographic series titled *Filmstills*). When we saw the cinema in Paris, called the Grand Theater, we were interested in it, but not to any extent more than in any other small town — it was not spectacular in any way. It had a grand name, but that was it.

Initially we took a couple of pictures and we went back on our way. Later we researched the cinema a bit more and found out that it belonged to the city and that it had been empty and out of operation for quite a while, but we still had no idea what the interior looked like. Since there were no pictures, we were curious so we decided to go back to Paris and schedule a visit to go inside the cinema. When we went back, we entered the building with flashlights. There was no electricity and the interior was completely dark. I walked a few steps ahead of Teresa, and I stepped into the main part of the theater. As I entered, in the dark, I could see pigeons were flying around inside the main theater, and I could hear many more of them. So I just walked back to Teresa and said, "This is it!"

TH: For *Giant* our fascination started with the three-sided facade of the house. In the 1956 Warner Brothers film, *Giant*, there is an epic, complex plot, but really the central character is the Reata — the grand mansion where all the intricacies of the drama are played out. When we first visited the skeletal remains of the set, it was the scale, shape and the sound of the set that drew us in. It was like a huge acoustical instrument. The set of this house was based on an existing house, the Waggoner Mansion in Decatur, Texas, which we visited while we were doing research. Further research into the pre-production of the original Warner Brothers film added to our intrigue. In most of our works, *Grand Paris Texas* included, the potential of our ideas begin with an element of architecture. For example, in earlier works, *Single Wide* or *House with Pool*, and especially *Eight, Eighteen*, all share explorations of architecture.



Students from The Khabele School visiting *Sound Speed Marker*. Photo by Jennifer Boomer.

FA: How does the notion of trace influence the content and structure of your works?

TH: A trace is a mark that something absent has left behind in its wake. The works in *Sound Speed Marker* find different ways of pointing to those absences.

FA: Viewers experience cinema individually through an emotional and psychological experience, while at the same time cinema appeals to the masses, and is viewed in a collective and public space. Do you feel your works share these cinematic conventions, through their exhibition in a gallery setting?

AB: I think of a movie theater as the reverse architecture of a camera. The way Teresa and I started getting involved in art was out of a fascination for movies and cinemas as the place where stories are told. Historically, cinema is a darkened architecture. Through illumination, a story is told — that's really why we're interested in cinema as space. It speaks to projection, reflection, and interiority, which are central to our work. So we are interested in cinema as a concept, as an architecture, but also, even more so, the idea of the dead cinema, the end of cinema.

FA: To what extent do you view these three works as visual ethnographies, and yourselves as anthropological detectives?

TH: We use aspects of these fields and we really enjoy threading these characteristics into the work. In all three video components in *Sound Speed Marker* we rely on the risk of taking a journey, of not knowing in advance where the visual and historical threads will lead us.

Altamura, Francesca. "In Conversation with Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler"
Ballroom Marfa blog (April 2014)

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Hubbard/Birchler Explore the Relationship between Location and Film in Texas

IMAGE ABOVE: Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler. *Giant*, 2014. Production still. High definition video with sound. Courtesy of Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin.

We know that every picture tells a story. But sometimes it's easy to take for granted the very places in which those pictures and stories exist.

Austin-based artist-educators Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler, known collaboratively as Hubbard/Birchler, have been telling complex, compelling narratives through their short films and photography since 1990.

"One reason Teresa and I are so interested in cinema is because it represents a type of storytelling device. We take as a common ground that people are fundamentally drawn to storytelling and to watching moving images," says Birchler.

Their exhibition *Sound Speed Marker* debuts this month at Ballroom Marfa. Then, it's on to the Irish Museum of Modern Art and, next year, the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston. Through three video installations—*Grand Paris Texas*, *Movie Mountain (Méliès)*, and the premiere of their most recent film, *Giant*—Hubbard/Birchler frame the traces that filmmaking leaves behind in physical places as well as in people's psyches. *Sound Speed Marker* also includes related photographs and a comprehensive catalogue due to be published in December 2014.

"In a sense, the works in this trilogy are portraits," says

Birchler, explaining that the impact a movie has on a place and its people is "a way in for us; it's a way of listening and looking closely."

The artists spent nearly two years just outside Marfa for the filming of *Giant* (2014), commissioned by Ballroom Marfa, capturing the remnants and "signs of life" of Reata Mansion from the 1956 Warner Bros. film of the same title. Hubbard/Birchler introduce this decaying, skeletal, three-sided facade as a main character in their story, which also depicts a film crew documenting its current-day condition alongside images of a 1955 Warner Brothers secretary as she types the location contract for the yet-to-be-created, soon-to-be-iconic Hollywood motion picture.

According to Hubbard, there is a presumption that nothing is happening in this place when, in fact, everything is happening. In addition to its compelling visual presence against the arid West Texas backdrop, the structure acts as an acoustical instrument. It was one of several important "triggers" for Hubbard/Birchler—things they look for and respond to in their process-driven art practice, things that other people might easily overlook.



Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler

Tape, 2009

Four digital archival prints

Each image 24 x 30 inches

Courtesy of Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Lora Reynolds Gallery,
Austin.

Movie Mountain (Méliès) (2011), the creation of which was supported by The Alturas Foundation, is a film about a mountain in the Chihuahua Desert near Sierra Blanca.

"When you hang around, people start talking," says Hubbard. She also says that movies have seeped into the vernacular of these small towns.

A local rancher they met gestured nonchalantly and drew their attention to a site known locally as Movie Mountain, saying a silent film was shot there in the early 1900s. The trigger was set for the artists to create *Movie Mountain (Méliès)* that, among other things, hints at the possibility that the silent film was created by little-known French filmmaker Gaston Méliès. Here, Hubbard/Birchler, weave together splintered story lines about memory and forgetting.

For *Grand Paris Texas* (2009), commissioned by the Modern Art Museum Fort Worth, it was The Grand Theater in Paris, Texas that triggered the artists' curiosity. Initially they shot a few photos as they passed through the small town and then went on their way.

"When we saw the cinema in Paris we were interested in it, but not more than in any other small town—it was not spectacular in any way. It had a grand name, but that was it," says Birchler.

They learned the cinema had been out of operation for quite some time and decided to schedule a visit to see the interior. Wearing masks and headlamps, the two artists joined hundreds of pigeons that had taken over the inside, from the belly of the building to the rafters.

Their experience became the setting for one of the not-so-linear narrative threads in *Grand Paris Texas*, coinciding with interviews with town residents about their cinematic experiences, including the lasting impressions of Wim Wenders's 1984 film *Paris, TX* (a film that was set in Paris but not actually filmed there), and a partially-erased copy of his film at the local video store. By also gesturing to two other seminal movies about the southwest, Bruce Beresford's *Tender Mercies* (1983) and King Baggot's classic silent film, *Tumbleweeds* (1925), Hubbard/Birchler address memory, loss, and the powerful lasting impressions of projection.

The unavoidable irony of *Sound Speed Marker* is that Hubbard/Birchler's interest in the traces of filmmaking inevitably leads them to make marks of their own. The projection here is that the reality and illusions that come with the territory is a story that takes great care to tell.

—NANCY ZASTUDIL

Zastudil, Nancy. "Sites of Cinema" *Arts + Culture Texas* (February 2014)

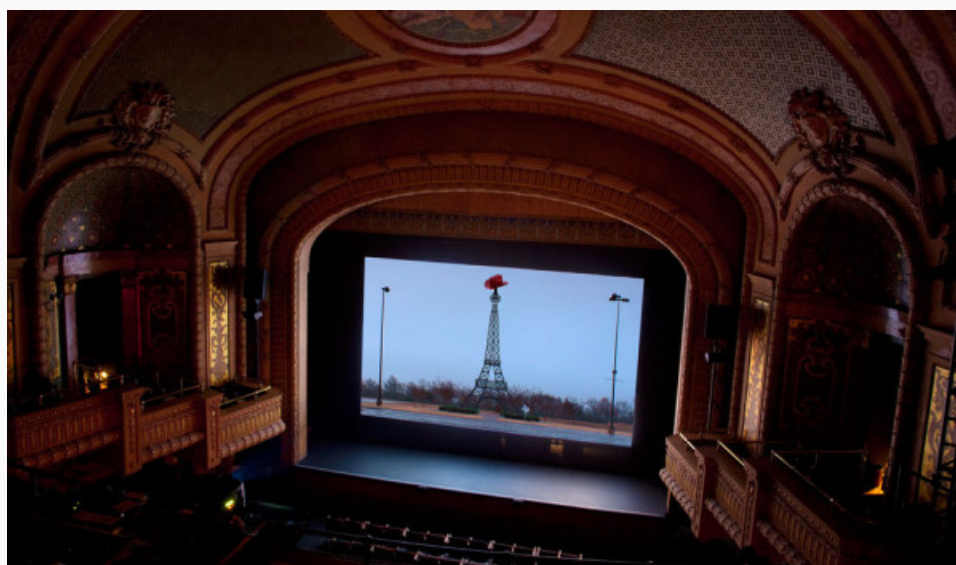
Glasstire {Texas visual art}

Sound/Speed/Marker: Hubbard/Birchler at Ballroom Marfa

April 16th, 2014 – Nicholas Knight

[Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler](#)'s current exhibition at [Ballroom Marfa](#), *Sound Speed Marker*, is constructed around a trilogy of videos: three works, made between 2009 and 2014, all set in Texas, all taking film history as their subject, all using the physical tools of movie-making as "characters" on-screen.

The three video works chart an evolution in Hubbard and Birchler's narrative technique. The earliest, *Grand Paris Texas* (2009), is also the most conventional. It is presented on a single, wall-mounted monitor, with headphones for the audio. At 54 minutes, it is the longest and plays on a schedule, like a movie, rather than a loop, like an art video. For the exhibition visitor who views the works chronologically, it introduces Hubbard and Birchler's mode of storytelling: a series of vignettes, each centered on a different individual recounting his or her experience of the subject at hand, interspersed with evocative passages of the camera exploring that subject, typically at a languid pace.



Grand Paris Texas, still

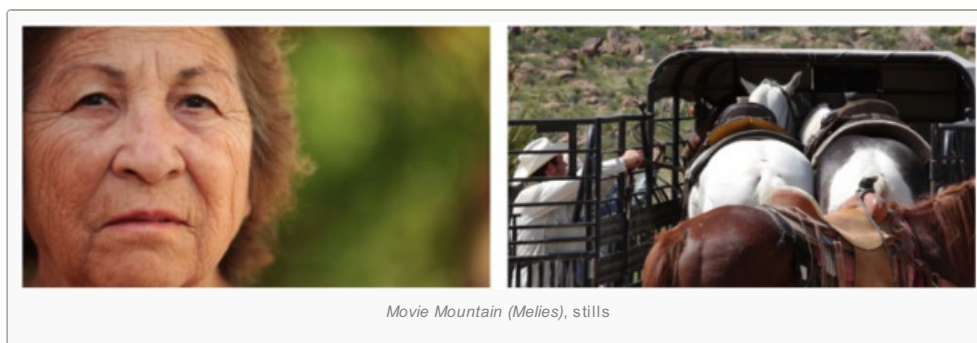
Grand Paris Texas is centered on the disused Grand Theater, in Paris, Texas, and the effect on that town of Wim Wenders' 1984 film *Paris, Texas*. It weaves together interview footage from a disarming cross-section of the local population, from the projectionist in the glory days of the theater, to the now-grown child star of *Tender Mercies* (who hailed from Paris), to a pair of teenagers who have never known The Grand as anything but deserted and rundown. Second and third degree associations are brought into the fold. A funeral home director's mother was the organist during the silent movie days; the video spends time on his livelihood too.

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The interludes between these diverse recollections are luxurious, indulgent affairs. We see the film crew setting up their equipment—lights, cables, dollies, rigs, stands—all manner of grip gear whose function is opaque to a non-film crew viewer. They move through the theater, now filled with pigeons and detritus, setting up shots. We see the finished shots cut into these sequences, though not as much as we see their

preparation. It is all done voicelessly, the crew's monastic reverence to the site reinforcing the pallor that time has already cast on it.

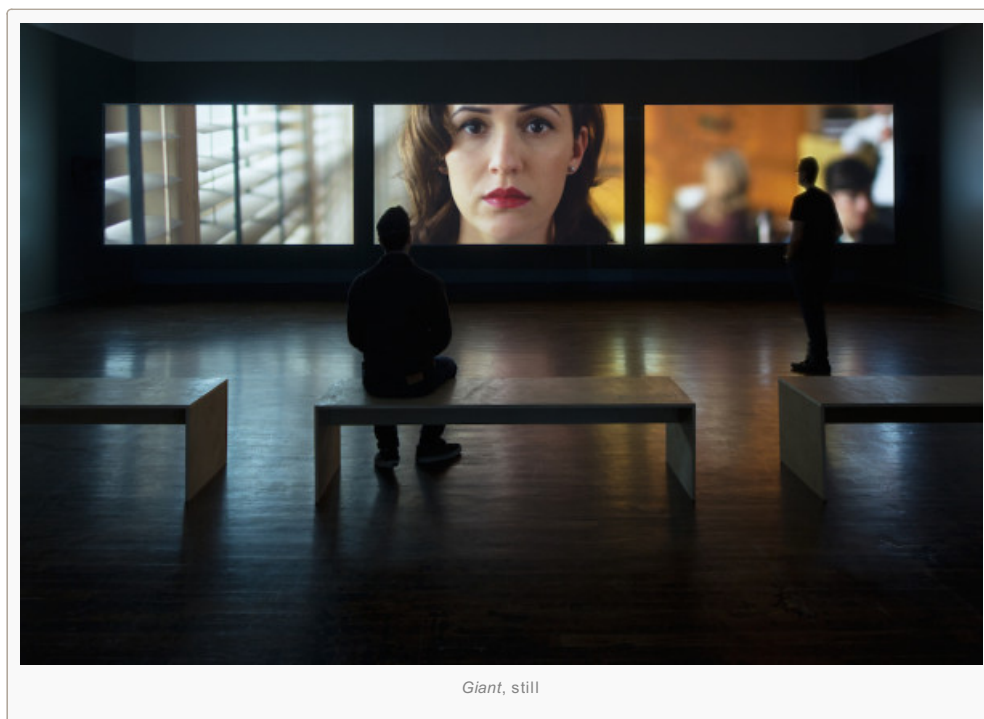
Of course, the "crew" are actors. Their silence is scripted, though that seems funny to say. This video is about the theater, and the local effects of Wenders' film, but even more, it is a meditation on the construction of history, not as a scientific or professionalized pursuit, but as the accumulation of individual experiences, with all the fragility and contradiction that entails. The interludes depicting the "real" theater are no less fragile and contradictory, being utterly bound within a set of stylistic choices that hide the structure as much as they reveal it.



Movie Mountain (Méliès), stills

Movie Mountain (Méliès) (2011) tells the extremely porous story of a mountain near Sierra Blanca where a silent movie was made in the 1910's. Barely anyone remembers the details about it, and we never learn the title. This void is filled instead with visual lingering and off-topic memories. Cattle ranchers plying their trade on the slopes of Movie Mountain, depicted in ravishing shot after ravishing shot, seduce us as cinematic substitutes for the story of what "really" happened. No one can remember just why Movie Mountain should be so called, but *this* movie was made there, and the script-writing Hollywood-rejected cowboy we meet during one sequence finally gets his face on-screen after all.

The dynamic tension between history and recollection is teased out in this work, signaled right off by the use of a two-screen projection. Hubbard and Birchler seize the visual, narrative, and technical possibilities available with this setup. Sometimes we see a continuous image across the two screens; sometimes we see two different, but clearly connected, images; sometimes we see juxtaposed images whose connection we are left to surmise. They play games with these arrangements. What appears to be a continuous image is occasionally the result of two cameras, as a bit of brush shimmies in the breeze on one side, the other side still dead calm.



Giant, still

The evolution from documentation to dispersion is fulfilled in the last video, *Giant* (2014), which was commissioned by Ballroom Marfa. It is shown in the largest space, on three screens that fill the long wall in the gallery. When we see a continuous image across this expanse, the extreme horizontal aspect ratio calls to mind the epic grandeur of the eponymous 1956 film itself. Hubbard and Birchler's formidable technical prowess allows them to capture stunning shots of the landscape, sunsets, thunderstorms, even ants swarming a dead grasshopper. The site of these natural wonders is an abandoned film set constructed by Warner Brothers for the original *Giant*. Now it is merely a skeletal ruin perched in the landscape, an armature about which the degradations of nature continue unabated.

Its role as an armature is twofold. It is a frame through which we see the landscape, in the present, and it is a relic, through which Hubbard and Birchler imagine the drafting of the contract between Warner Brothers and the land owner on which the structure was to be built. *Giant* cuts back and forth between these two scenarios. They introduce a new element that was absent from the previous two videos, historical reconstruction. A secretary in a sunny office in February 1955 sits at her typewriter, consulting the shorthand on her notepad, typing up the contract. We get extreme closeups of the typewriter mechanisms, the keys striking the paper, the carriage return; the secretary, all lipstick and eyeliner, smokes, is visited by a male supervisor, and gazes wistfully out the window for some reason.

Giant dispenses with spoken language altogether, and the convention of talking-head interviews. There are no "real" people telling their stories. The site of the historical movie is not defined by absence, as in the previous two videos. Instead, the history is concrete and well documented, which seems to grant license to Hubbard and Birchler to push further away from narrative. In this, they achieve fantastic visual pleasure with the landscape scenes in the present. But they falter somewhat with the historical reconstruction. There is not quite enough interest in it to sustain the 30 minute running time. Gerard Byrne's videos reconstructing seminal moments from art history handle the balance between veracity and sentimentality better, and with more commitment; viewers accustomed to the stylized obsessions of *Mad Men* will not be overly impressed by this

1955 office.

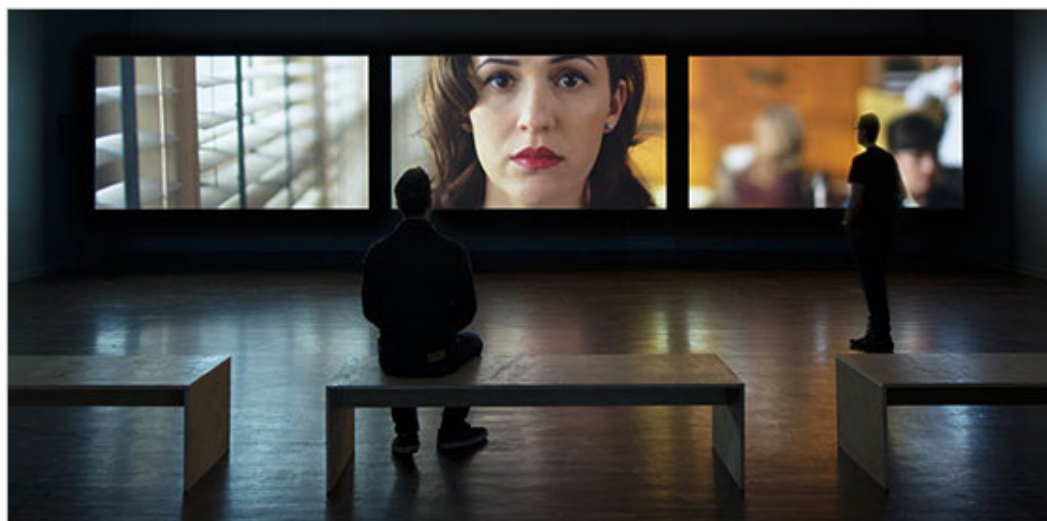
Finally, about the title *Sound Speed Marker*. I've discussed mostly the things we see, but sound is hugely important to these works. In each video we see shots of the boom mic, swathed in a "dead cat," collecting sound in the field. We hear amazing things, like a grasshopper's legs tapping along a wood pole. They assemble this audio as a landscape unto itself. Approaching storms, raindrops on scrap metal, a ringing telephone, the gravel voices of the interviewees. Those three words, sound / speed / marker, are a compressed version of the checks a film crew goes through before beginning a shot. By making them into a title, Hubbard and Birchler direct our attention to the moment immediately outside the film. They ask us to pay attention to the role that filmmaking plays in the construction of history, and then to go further and apply that idea more broadly. Every history is built from stories, sometimes slapped together ramshackle, sometimes corporate and impenetrable. Every history too, is in danger of decay, of breaking into lone planks that swing in the breeze, disconnected from context but never mute.

Knight, Nicholas. "Sound/Speed/Marker: Hubbard / Birchler at Ballroom Marfa" *Glasstire* (April 2014)

**BALLROOM
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NEW YORK TRAVEL

3. What to Do



It's easy to get lost in the immersive film installations at Ballroom Marfa.

(Photo: Courtesy of Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin)

Hit **Ballroom Marfa** (free admission; \$5 suggested donation), one of the premier arts organizations in town, to view *Sound Speed Marker*, a video-based exhibit that explores the Southwest as a cinematic site. Through August 10, you can catch the exhibition's three short films, including the 2014 debut of "Giant," a Ballroom Marfa original documentary short that chronicles the decay of the Reata ranch film set, outside of Marfa, which was left neglected for decades after the movie wrapped.

Miller, Jenny. "Find Your Inner Film Buff in Marfa" *New York Magazine* (April 2014)

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