

Barn Rays

By
Justin Lowman

This publication accompanies “Barn Rays”– a site and light installation in a two-horse pole barn.

Thanks to Leslie Ross-Robertson and Michael Ned Holte for extended friendship and input.

Thanks to Sandra Lowman, Charles Lowman, and Jack and Nancy Walchli for believing.

Special thanks to Jack and Joseph Lowman for their continual presence and insight, and especially Jennifer Faye Walchli Lowman for her enduring patience, confidence, and companionship.

Thanks also to Steve Turner, Lauren Mackler, Westside Print Center and Otis Laboratory Press.

Cover and binding by
Leslie Ross-Robertson | Modern Optic.

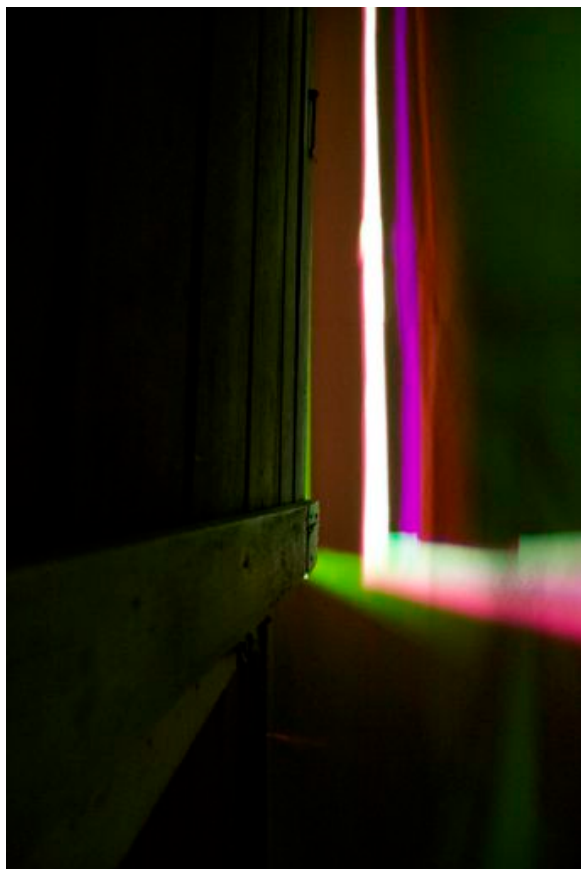
All photographs appear courtesy of the artist.

The final statement in this book is an adaptation of Walter de Maria’s essay from *Artforum*, vol. XVIII, No. 8 (April 1980), pp.52-57.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, and information storage or retrieval) without permission in writing from the artist. Copyright 2011.

First Edition: 20 copies

*Dedicated to the Gillaspie family, especially
Elta Faye and her heirs*





Barn Rays

Barn Rays blends sunlight, nocturnal suburban glow, and electric light sources through scrim, frames and numerous apertures/leaks – rotting gaps, separations, knotholes, doors, and windows—of a two-stall horse barn situated on what was once part of a larger walnut grove in the oldest part of suburban Northridge in the San Fernando Valley. Presently, citrus trees (predominantly oranges) and a handful of others (walnuts, palms and a maple) surround this rustic structure at the southwest corner of our one-acre lot—a property that’s been with Jennifer’s family since 1947. In 1954, her grandparents raised this very barn as my mother-in-law’s eleven-year-old footprints indicate in what was once the tack room floor.

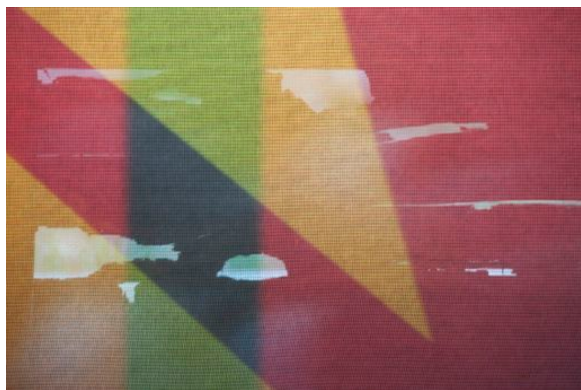
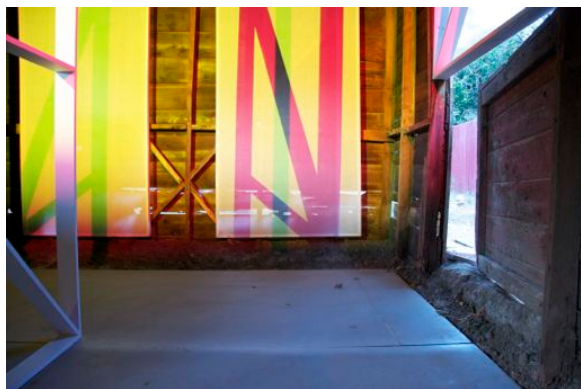
For the past fifty-seven years or so, natural conditions and human involvement have shaped the history of this site. A relentless valley climate—copious sunshine; desert heat/aridity; Santa Ana winds; deluging rains; occasional floods and earthquakes—all have played significant roles in the barn’s superficial and structural demise. These events can be traced through fading/peeling red paint, rusting nails,

rotting boards, separating knots/seams, and shifting angles. Additional marks/artifacts remain from its previous list of occupants—horses, chickens, rabbits, rodents, wasps, hornets, spiders and termites of which many of the latter still thrive. It is in just such a “sub-rural” context (stable, coop, shed, and now studio) that I continue to explore art and architectural relationships through light and material interventions.

In early 2010, not sure whether to raze or raise such a dilapidated structure, I began to slowly excavate the site. I removed massive accumulations of stored “stuff” from inside, ripped out wallboards, dug out yards of dirt from the compacted floors, and patched certain sections with painted white boards backed with reflective Mylar. Around the perimeter, I cleared and sorted piles of hard and soft materials for future repurposing. I subsequently constructed two porticos for storing some of those items. While often a process of uncertainty, I have always been sure of my interest in the barn’s ruinous, ephemeral beauty—fading colors and rotting materials—as well as its resonance with similar, rural structures of my southern Wisconsin childhood. Much less important than any autobiographical details, however, is the way in

which light permeates such a structure—how it intersects specific materials in order to heighten variable, temporal rhythms through color and shadow as much as how light emerges complicit in its demise.

Lately the improved “flow” of its spaces and a reduction of literal/figurative burdens has led me to feel like I’m providing comfort measures for the nearly departed, especially when, for example, the interior gets flooded by volumes of rainwater. When doubts subside, however, it’s a place to contemplate the ongoing collision of histories: artistic, architectural, social, geological et al.





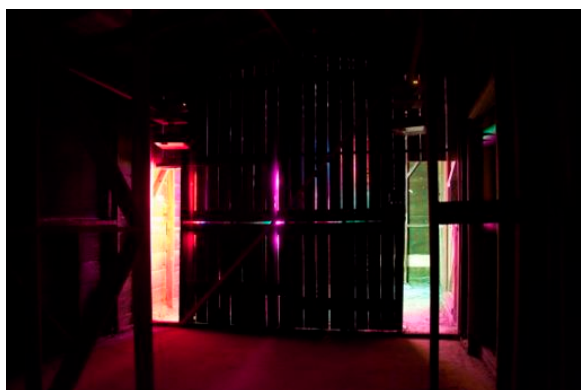


















NOT QUITE TABULA RASA: A CONVERSATION
BETWEEN MICHAEL NED HOLTE AND JUSTIN
LOWMAN

MICHAEL NED HOLTE: When you moved to Los Angeles from Wisconsin, I'm sure you weren't expecting to find yourself living with a barn. But that's exactly what happened when you moved into the house in Northridge. Do you remember your first encounter with this barn? What were your first impressions?

JUSTIN LOWMAN: Jennifer had always spoken fondly of her grandmother's place and all that it meant for her growing up, and she wanted me to see the place. I have some vague recollection of the barn, perhaps afternoon light against all the surrounding overgrowth. Somehow it just didn't seem possible that a structure like this would exist in the middle of a largely, suburban area. The whole *mise-en-scène* was the kind of thing you find in rural parts of the Midwest. Even though I consider the boundaries of LA to be so vast, where anything is possible, this was just really so surprising. At this point, there were no thoughts of even living here, because we were enjoying our life together in Hollywood. However, beyond the geographical disconnect—locally and nationally—

there was indeed something special about this property and particularly the barn, but I really couldn't put it into words. I'd like to think that's what I'm figuring out presently.

M: You've mentioned that the barn is quite different from those we grew up seeing in Wisconsin, but how so, exactly?

J: This barn is different in terms of original intent and design. As part of a landscape that was quickly becoming the suburban San Fernando Valley, it was not meant so much for work as it was for leisure, riding horses from here to the hills directly north as they were able to do then. Of course, as the history of this barn evolved, it was used for chickens and storage where it did become more utilitarian. The paradigmatic barn that I envision, in fact the one I imagine most of us do, whether it's from first-hand accounts or story books, is the larger, gambrel-roofed, dairy barn where it was meant to not only house livestock and feed in the wintertime, but also to afford other operations, again, during the harsher months. So, a climactic factor also factors in to the design.

M: Yes, I believe we have—or had—the same archetypal “barn” in our heads, at least before your project began.

If I remember correctly, you had given some thought over the years to razing the barn and building something else in its place—presumably something a little more contemporary, refined, “clean.” At what point did you decide to embrace the existing structure?

J: I knew I wanted to start working with the space after finishing graduate school, which was December of 2009. My first thought was to use it as a model to study light conditions in order to set up a “clean” space, as you say, in order to do work. Thoughts at that time were to cut holes where needed, build partitions and so on. At the same time, I knew there were elements of the structure, namely rotting boards, missing knots, and other aberrations, that were interesting for their own sake.

So, as I was excavating the building, really just clearing it out and stripping it to its essential structure, I began to realize there was a lot of life here that would be lost if I were to just break it down and tear it apart. Textures and colors really began to emerge through my interventions that revealed to me a better pace

for such a place. So, then I really started to think about it as a project in its own terms. Of course, when I unfolded some of the connections between the words “raise,” “raze,” and “rays,” I really felt like I was in business for my own interests in light and site and how they interact. So, this is where I’m at today, roughly a year and a half after I had begun.

M: In other words, there was no such thing as “tabula rasa”? (“Rasa,” of course, shares a root with “raze.”) This barn has baggage—historical, familial, and emotional. A footprint your mother-in-law made in the concrete as a child is still there!

But the fluorescent lighting fixtures you use also have baggage, given a well-known art historical lineage that includes Dan Flavin, Robert Irwin, and others. Perhaps that merger produces a kind of tension or dramatic conflict below the surface of the work. Do you find that opposition productive?

J: LOL re: baggage. Perhaps, the fact that these terms abrade one another points to how complicated the notion of personal and art historical history become at a site where even geological history plays no small role.

The opposition you suggest between Irwin and Flavin, for example, is indeed productive because it forces me to stay alert to their unique positions. At a material level—scrim and fluorescents—let's say, we often associate these with the artists you suggest. If I could push the dialogue away from these—for what's the difference between a tube of paint and a fluorescent tube by now anyway? —I will have considered an aspect of my work successful in terms of focusing your attention on the effects of these materials and how complicated their affects might be for how we perceive the world, or, more specifically, how we see a collision of light and matter on the surface of a white, stretched scrim against a fifty-seven year old barn.

M: I see your point about fluorescent tubes and paint, and mostly agree. In *Kant After Duchamp*, Thierry de Duve argues, rather persuasively, that the store-bought tube of paint, which is obviously a product that emerged through industrialization and standardization, is really a kind of readymade. When it comes to the use of light as a material, I am always interested in the question of where a work begins and ends—or rather the boundary lines around one's experience of that work.

I had seen your barn many times over the years, but when I came to its “official unveiling,” I couldn’t easily separate the works in the barn from the structure itself, and the barn as an object from a larger experience, including the entire property and the festive gathering that occurred some distance from the actual barn. What part of the experience do you want visitors to consider—by which I mean consider as your work?

J: You mean you didn't wonder if the stars overhead contained a graphic match with the smaller holes on the side of the barn?

Yes, I suppose, you have nailed the difficulty with working with light squarely on the head. How to bracket or frame such fluid events, as I see them, is to utilize color, for example, as a way to connect parts, between walls and projected light, for example. Of course, elusive and paradoxical conditions are always in play. I would like the viewer to note such a difficulty in capturing a moment or object in time and that it's really an appreciation of process, and, in the case of this project, repeat visits will reveal differences in the site and how that registers in our own perception of time and place is toward the point. It's the classic question between art and life and how on such a continuum, it's quite

difficult to know when one is becoming the other. I'd rather you think about relative positions rather than absolutes.

M: Yes, of course these are indeed slippery slopes!

My understanding of many site-based works I've experienced firsthand—including *Spiral Jetty* and *Lightning Field*, which we have visited together—is that they act as a frame for what surrounds them. In the case of *Lightning Field*, one becomes more acutely aware of the air and atmospheric conditions, for example; with *Spiral Jetty* one might think about the elemental ubiquity of salt, if not the geological history of the site. In both of these examples, time plays a role as crucial as location in defining the site: One will inevitably have an experience relative to *when* they encounter the work. This is obviously true for the barn as well—it looks quite different at sunset than it does two hours later, and so on.

J: With the sites you mention, we also found something else—a linear jetty or a cabin—in proximity that held our interest nearly as strongly, if not more so. Just guessing here, but it seems like it may have had something to do with the kind of materials subject to the same conditions

but on a more human scale where time registers through it's decay. Rocks/salt and stainless steel rods seem to synchronize more with the landscape. How those elements converse in relation to one another—the work and the thing next to it—seems to be operating with the barn as well, though the "other" still eludes me here, which I suppose is one reason why I continue to work on it.

M: Maybe that "other" is suburbia, which is in so many ways just as strange and compelling as the depopulated desert where those other works are located!

J: Perhaps the "other" is the cacophony of sound and light, barking dogs, partying neighbors, non-sensical passages of broken conversation, tennis players at night, not to mention the constant drone of planes, trains, and automobiles—all just beyond the fence-lines that surround an otherwise, potentially peaceful, and contemplative space. Rather than situate such a site "outside" of everything, it remains somewhere in the midst of an ongoing suburban glow.

M: Unlike those historical examples, which are in effect handed over to the elements, you are still

tinkering, right? (Or, you will be again?) What guides these changes or evolutions? Do you feel like you're just getting started? Is there some notion of finitude—an end? So many questions, I know.

J: Part of what guides the evolution of the project is external conditions (events that preceded my arrival, other occupants, weather conditions, and so on), though most of that is fairly stable now. There has been some intent to get to the "bottom of it" without having it fall over, to work the surface if you will, and to bring it back to a state where I not only have exhausted my own fascinations with the light and material conditions but that it might arrive at a point where others can use and interpret the space according to different kinds of logic. I had considered a deadline, but then I realized this was going to take much longer than I had initially thought, partially because I am not able to invest as much time into it as when I first began. The decisions I make are a slow and careful response to what the site itself is doing. In this way, it's circumstantial, improvisational, compositional, and so on.

M: Speaking as someone who has known you for a long time, I'm not exactly surprised to hear that your process involves some deliberation!

J: Yes! To be continued...

◦

The preceding conversation took place in "real time" via email on August 27, 2011.

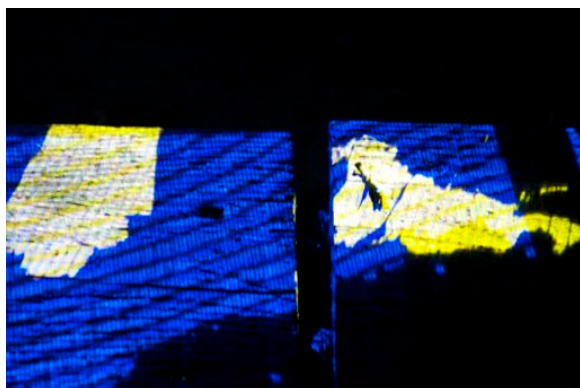
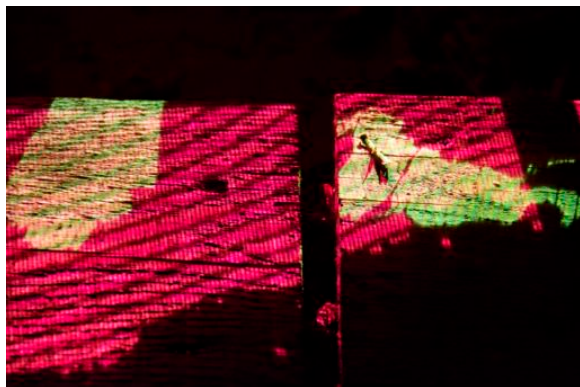
Michael Ned Holte is a critic and independent curator based in Los Angeles.

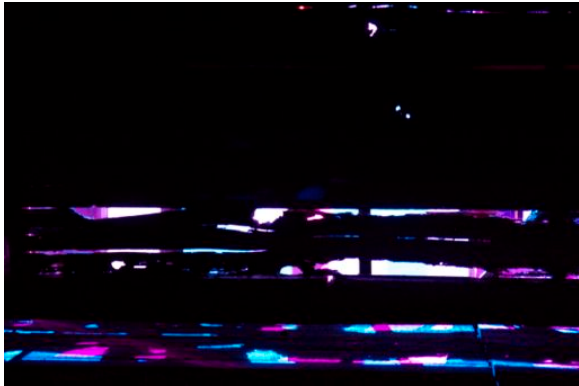


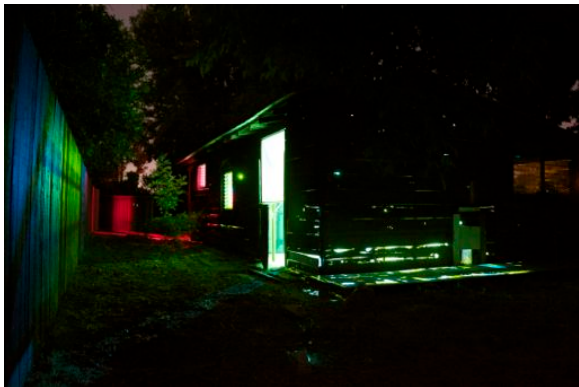












**“Some Facts, Notes, Data, Information,
Statistics and Statements:”**

Barn Rays is an evolving, site-conditioned work. The landscape is not the setting for the work but a part of the work.

The work is located in Southern California on a one-acre lot in Northridge, a suburban community of Los Angeles in the San Fernando Valley.

Desirable qualities of the work include visible, structural decay: superficial patina/color; and many days of sunshine along with occasional rain, wind, and earthquakes.

The site is located 797 feet above sea level.

Barn Rays is 7 miles directly north of the Pacific Ocean at the Santa Monica Pier.

Barn Rays is 2 miles northeast of the epicenter from the 1994 Northridge earthquake; significant structural damage was recorded.

“The earliest manifestation of land art was represented in the drawings and plans for the *Mile-Long Parallel Walls in the Desert*, 1961-1964.”

Barn Rays began in the form of a site excavation following the completion of *Pacific Objects* in 2009.

The sculptural installation is ongoing...

The work was self-motivated and is maintained by the artist.

"The sum of the facts does not constitute the work or determine its esthetics."

Barn Rays measures thirty-two feet six inches long by twenty feet two inches wide.

There are five double-dutch doors as points of access.

There are four jalousie windows.

A simple walk around the perimeter takes approximately thirty seconds.

The primary experience takes place within *Barn Rays* that includes an approximate twelve feet expansion around the exterior.

Because the light qualities—natural and electrical—central to the work, viewing the work between transitions of daylight and nightlight are optimum. Part of the essential content of the work is audible and visual suburban cacophony.

Excavation/Installation of *Barn Rays* has been carried out periodically since early 2010.

The principal associate in excavation/installation, Justin Lowman, has worked with the sculptural installation continuously, though periodically, for the last year and a half or so.

No aerial survey was conducted.

A quick survey of the exterior and interior of the structure with visual analysis determined the starting point for the investigation.

A horizontal section of rotting boards, measuring eight feet long by two feet high was the primary focus for projecting two, intersecting video channels of sequential color shifts (RGB v. CMYK) through cracks, knots and rots from inside to outside.

It has taken fifteen months, thus far, to excavate and interpret the site.

Barn Rays opened on April 9, 2011 as the first reintegration of art, architecture and land.

It is intended that the work be viewed alone, or in the company of small groups, on multiple, non-consecutive occasions in order to appreciate daily and seasonal shifts.

A permanent caretaker and artist resides in a domestic, mid-century, ranch-style dwelling on site in order to care for, maintain, and evolve the work.

A visit may be reserved through phone call, email, or text.

The Valley climate is one of five microclimates within Los Angeles.

The light is as important as the materials.

Thinking is real.

