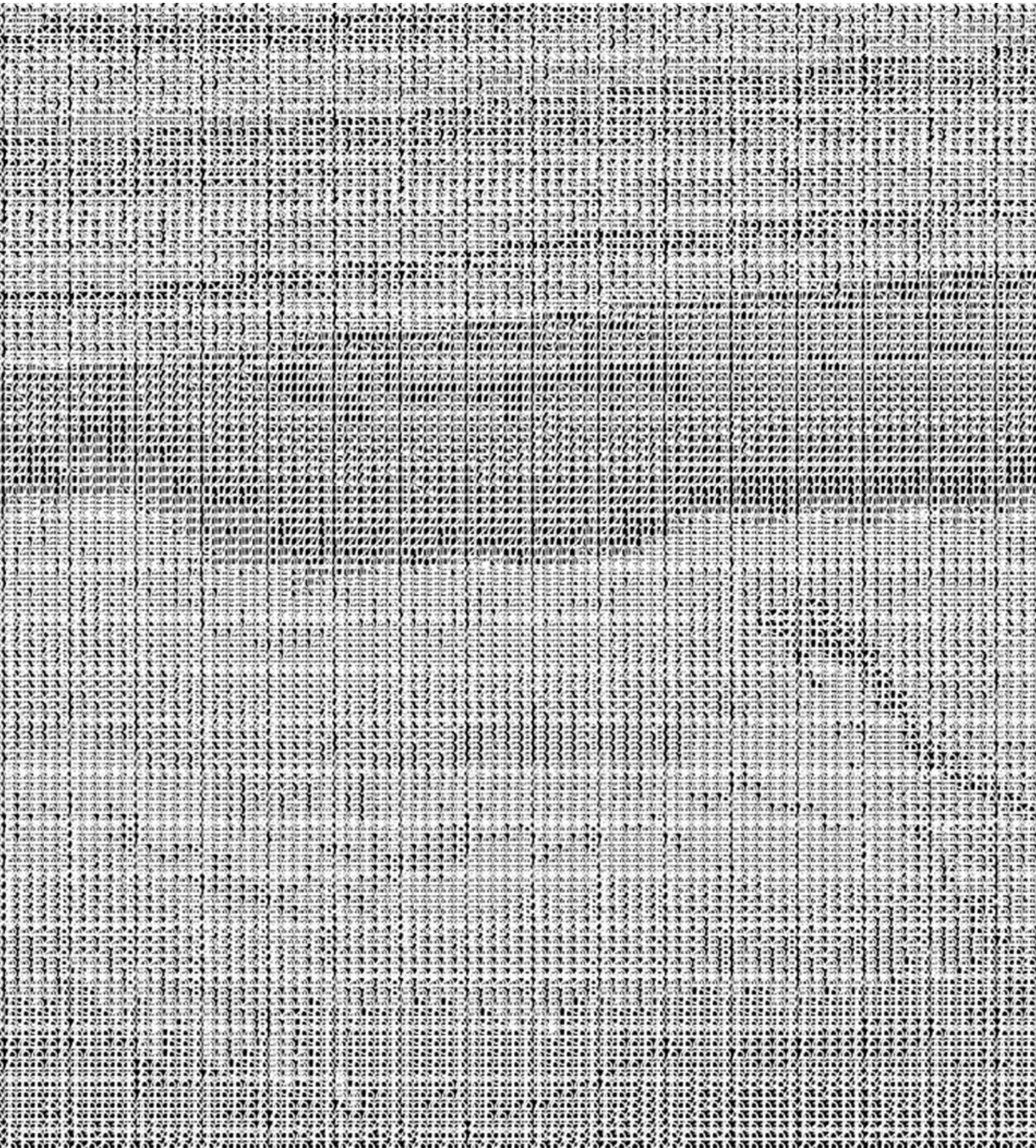


# David Bowen



## What the Work Knows by D. Graham Burnett

One often hears that this or that painting (mosaic, icon, mural, etc.) depicts a figure whose eyes appear uncannily to follow the spectator. A thick stratigraphy of mytho-poesis and history lies under this trope, which straddles the threshold of art and life. Why does this tale recur? What is it trying to tell us about art, artists, and the work of looking? It seems impossible *not* to situate those roving eyes at the juncture of artistic virtuosity and shamanic magic. Which is to say, the unsettling feeling that an artist has conjured from dead matter (from ochre and malachite, from Murano glass and gold leaf), a quasi-being of queer penchants (a thing-life that appears to know something of us and its world)—this harkens all the way back to what we must suppose is the shared archaic ancestor of Frankenstein-science and Pygmalion-power.

The first David Bowen piece I saw put me in mind of all this. It was a gallery-mounted drafting table at the center of which sat a nervous stylus arm that orbited, compass-like, describing jittery circles. The general effect was not unlike an old-fashioned radar screen: a 360-degree expanse upon which a sensitive indicator swept out, in polar coordinates, a sensory field. In fact, that's exactly what the piece was. The perturbations in those light charcoal circles indicated the piece's real-time awareness of visitors to the gallery. Each deflection left a trace that recorded the improvisational and emergent choreography of all those who milled around the work itself, drawing near to peruse, circling slightly in an effort to understand, moving away (while looking back) to test their hypotheses. The large, round, concentric drawings that emerged from *sonar drawing device* (2002) looked for all the world (and this was my favorite part) like a big eye: the faint radiance of the tightly layered lines nicely evoking the radial scintillations of an iris, and the central punch-out hole (through which the stylus arm passed on the drafting table), a perfect pupil-void.

What do works of art know? It is a strange question, for in one sense, of course, they don't "know" anything—knowledge being, as the term has come to be used in our tradition, the special purview of self-consciousness; knowledge being, within our tradition, the distinctive crossing point of information and awareness. And yet, the long lineage of works of art that seem to see their seers is also a history of the ambition to make something that knows something—that knows where we are, that follows us with roving eyes because it is aware of us, and in that awareness shares something of our condition.

Examining Bowen's work over the past decade reveals a pervasive preoccupation with this important problematic. *Tele-present water* (2011, 2013) and *underwater* (2012, 2013) both exemplify the evolution of the themes, craft, and technologies on display in *sonar drawing device*. In these two more recent works, the data from remote sensing systems are transformed (or, perhaps better, transposed) into expressive sculptural gestures. We come upon a work of art that knows something about the world and that is engaged in a process of bodying forth its knowledge. Surveillance is implied, but the mood reverses the dreaded radial architecture of the panopticon. Through the elaborations of this Daedalus, the centripetal tools of information-collation are made to serve an expansive and encompassing art of centrifugal relocations. What we are looking at is in fact "seeing elsewhere." It is tempting to suggest that the narcissism implicit in those tales of paintings that kept their eye on us is here, in these works, being exquisitely reversed, even everted—to be replaced by a dynamic awareness of our planet and its troubled, churning kinetics.

\*

The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Culver City, California, features a small exhibition on the stagecraft of baroque theater, and more specifically on the different mechanisms used to depict, scenographically,

a tempestuous ocean—of the utmost importance for the broad genre of shipwreck melodramas. One walks past the little windows on to dynamic dollhouse models of these sea scenes: long, spinning spindles bedecked with scimitar blades of painted blue produce a field of whirling waves; saw-frame joists crested by gentle undulations swing and rock to create the nimble dance of a running tide.

We, now, here on Earth, are currently late in the second act of a tragic *naufrazio* play that is unfolding at the scale of the entire globe, as the sea rises to protest our carelessness and threatens to swallow us for our sins. Bowen's mesmerizing mechanical sea surfaces can be thought of as something more than set design for this large and fateful theater of our time. It would be more correct to suggest that he has brought the protagonist of the drama right to the gallery stage.

The sea. Out there. All around. It has its eye on us.

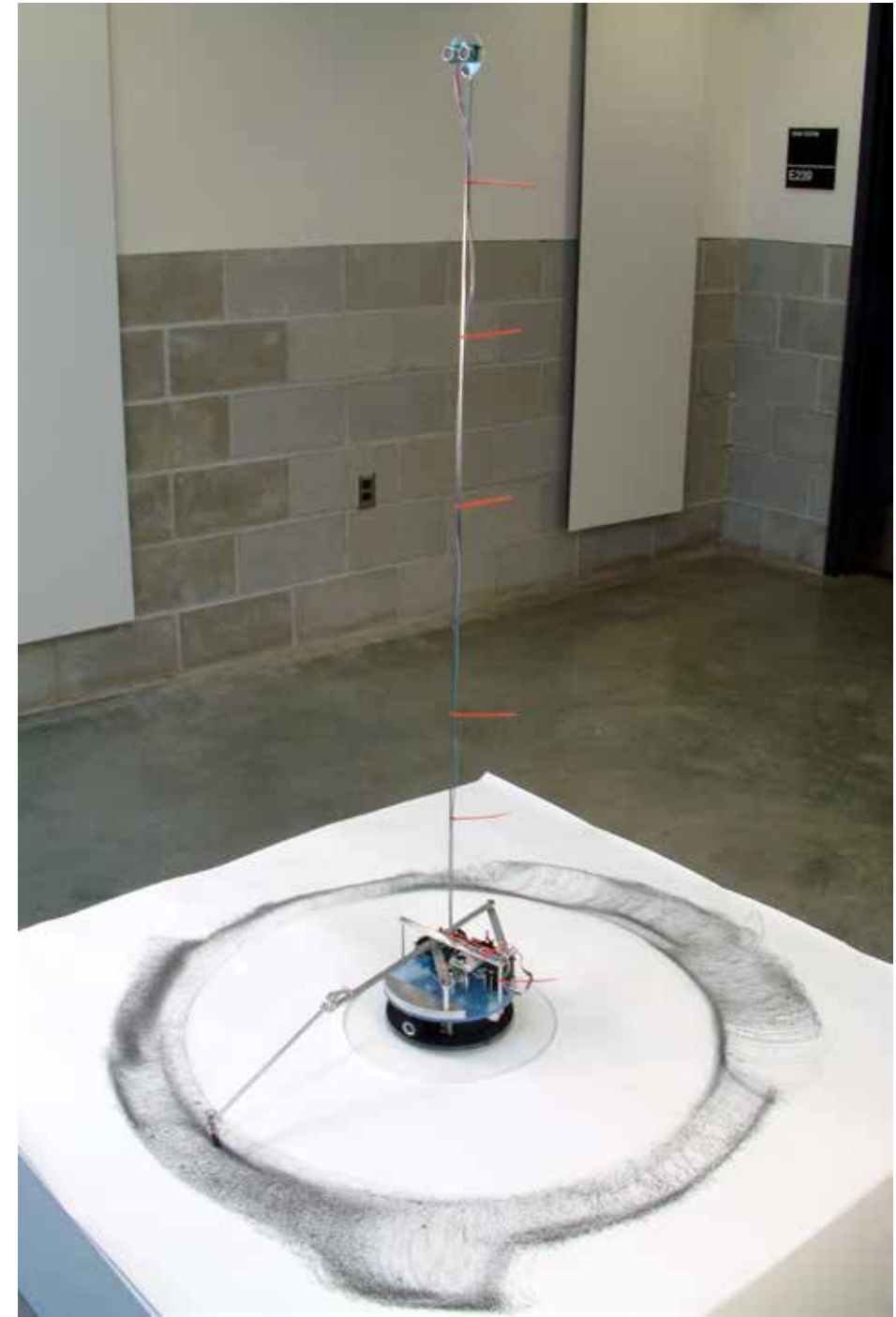
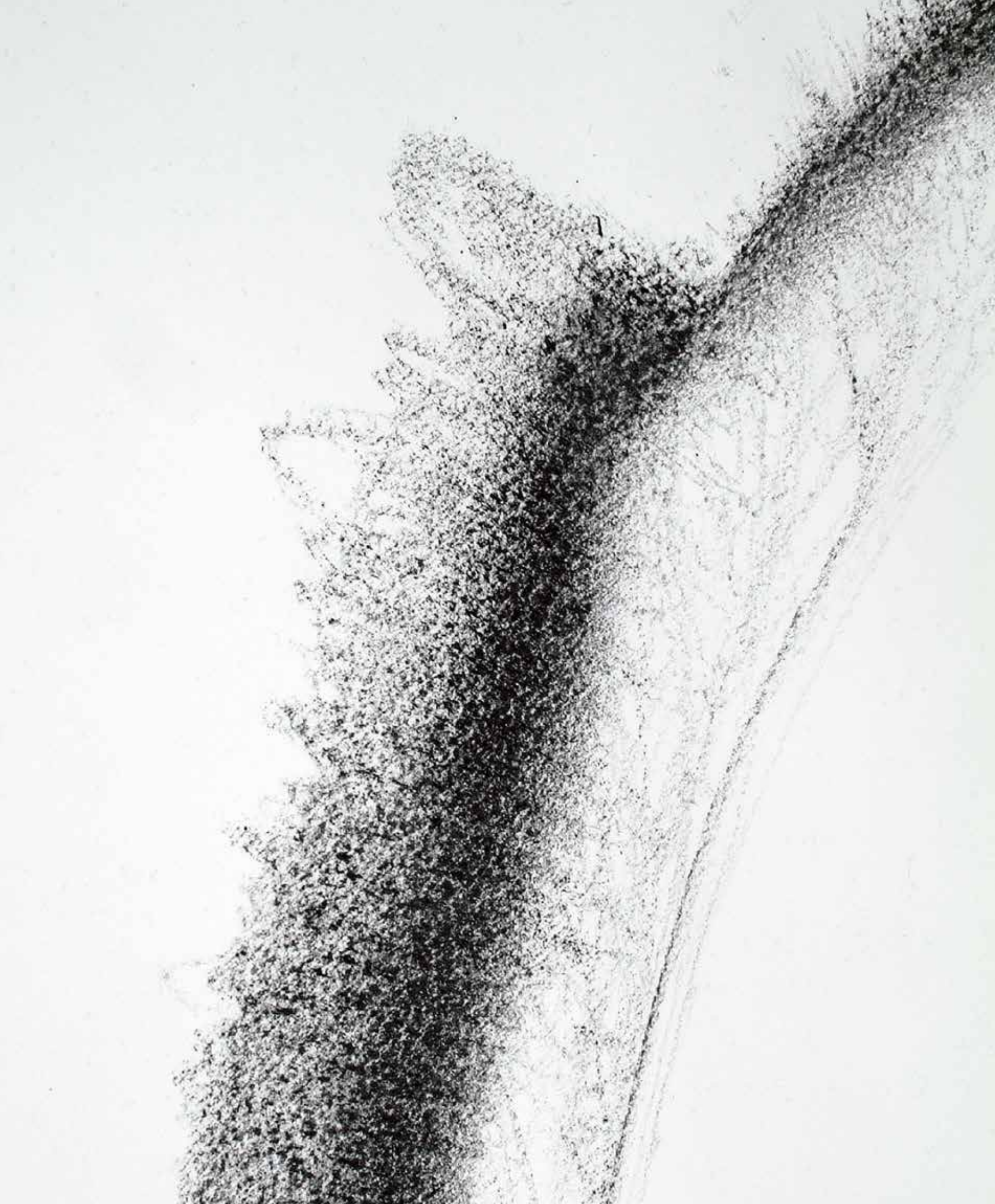
2002–16

## Works and Installation Views

---

Graham Burnett is an artist and writer based in New York City. He is an editor at *Cabinet* magazine and teaches at Princeton University.





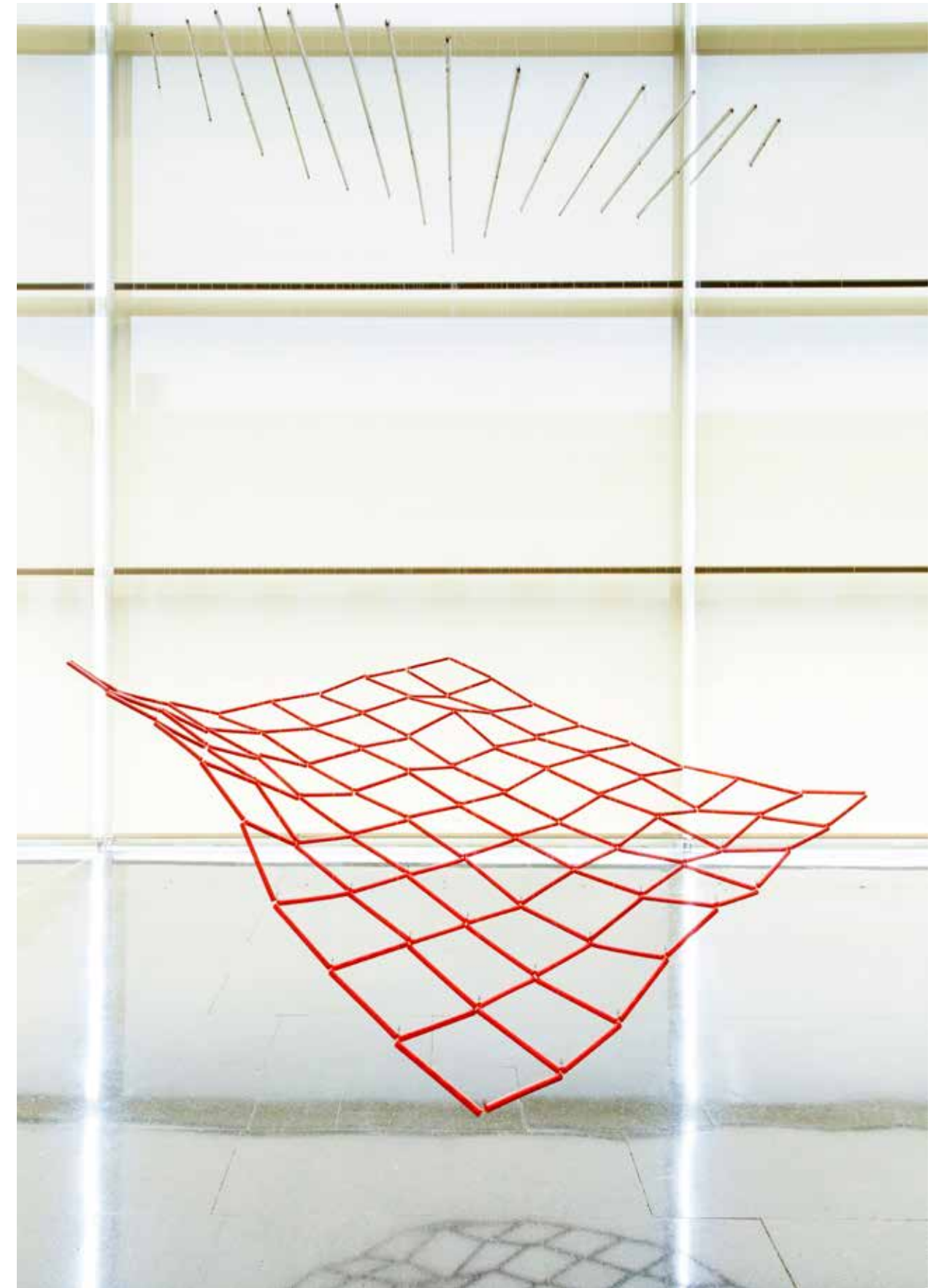
*sonar drawing device (2002)*

This work uses a sonar detector to take a distance reading of a space and the people and objects within it. The device renders a circular wax-crayon drawing based on the information the sonar distance sensor gathers. Each drawing it renders is specific to a particular space and the activity that takes place within it.



*tele-present water* (2011)

This installation draws information from the intensity and movement of the water in a remote location. Wave data are being collected and updated from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration data buoy station 51003. This station was originally moored 205 nautical miles southwest of Honolulu on the Pacific Ocean. It went adrift, and the last report from its moored position was around April 25, 2011. It is still transmitting valid observation data, but its exact location is unknown. The wave intensity and frequency collected from the buoy are scaled and transferred to the mechanical grid structure, resulting in a simulation of the physical effects caused by the movement of water from this distant unknown location. This work physically replicates a remote experience and makes observation of the activity of an isolated object, otherwise lost at sea, possible through direct communication.



Photograph by Gunnar Knechtel Photography, CCCB, Barcelona



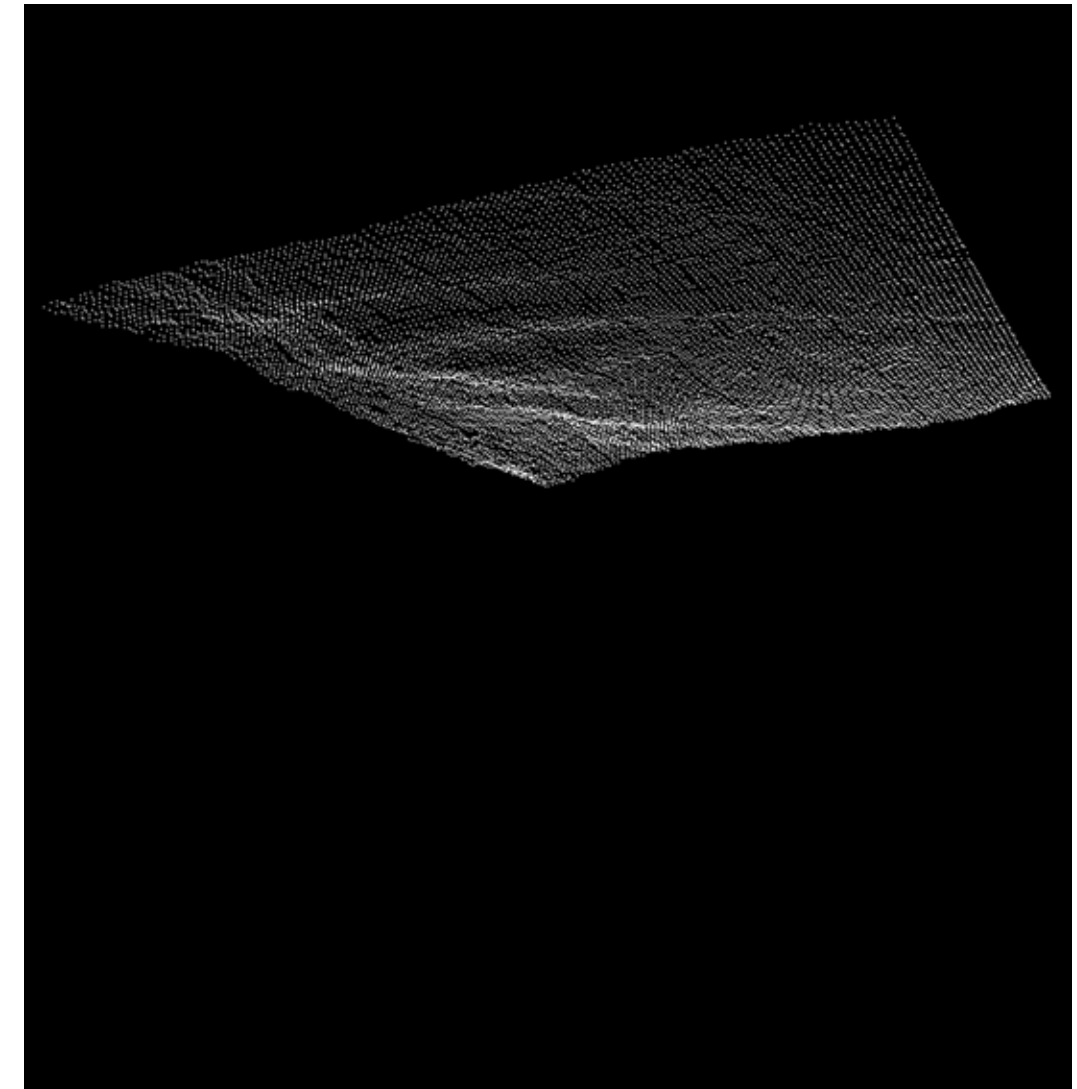
Photograph by the NOAA National Data Buoy Center





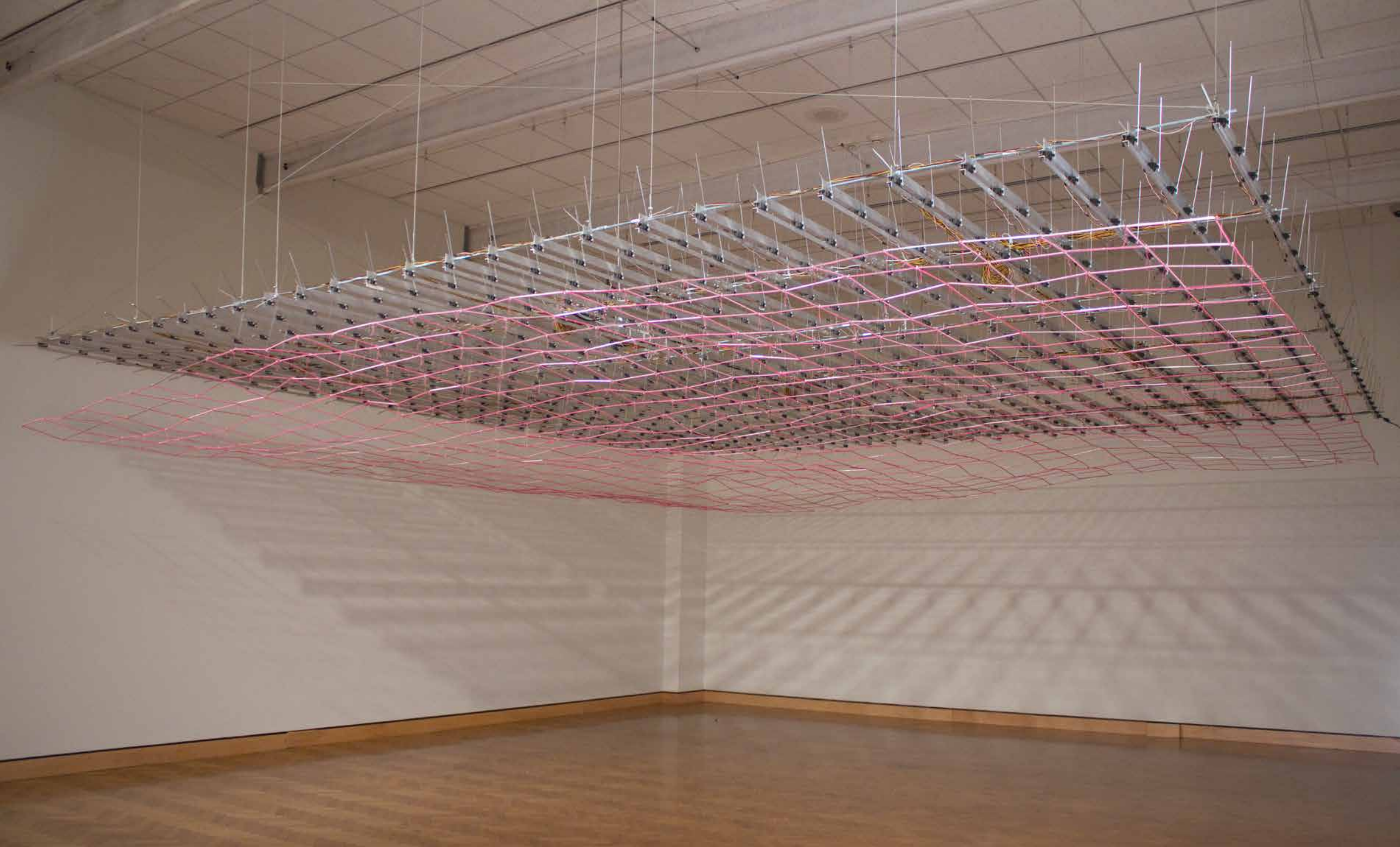
*underwater* (2012, 2013)

This large-scale suspended installation is articulated using data from the surface of water. A repurposed Microsoft Kinect was used to collect three-dimensional data from wave action on the surface of Lake Superior. These data are used to articulate the mechanical installation consisting of 729 individual servomotors. The complex and subtle movements on the surface of the water are simulated within the installation by the servomotors moving according to the collected data. Versions of the installation were commissioned for Future Primitives in 2012 at the Biennale Interieur, Kortrijk, Belgium, and the Minneapolis Institute of Art in 2013.



Photograph by Kristina Estell



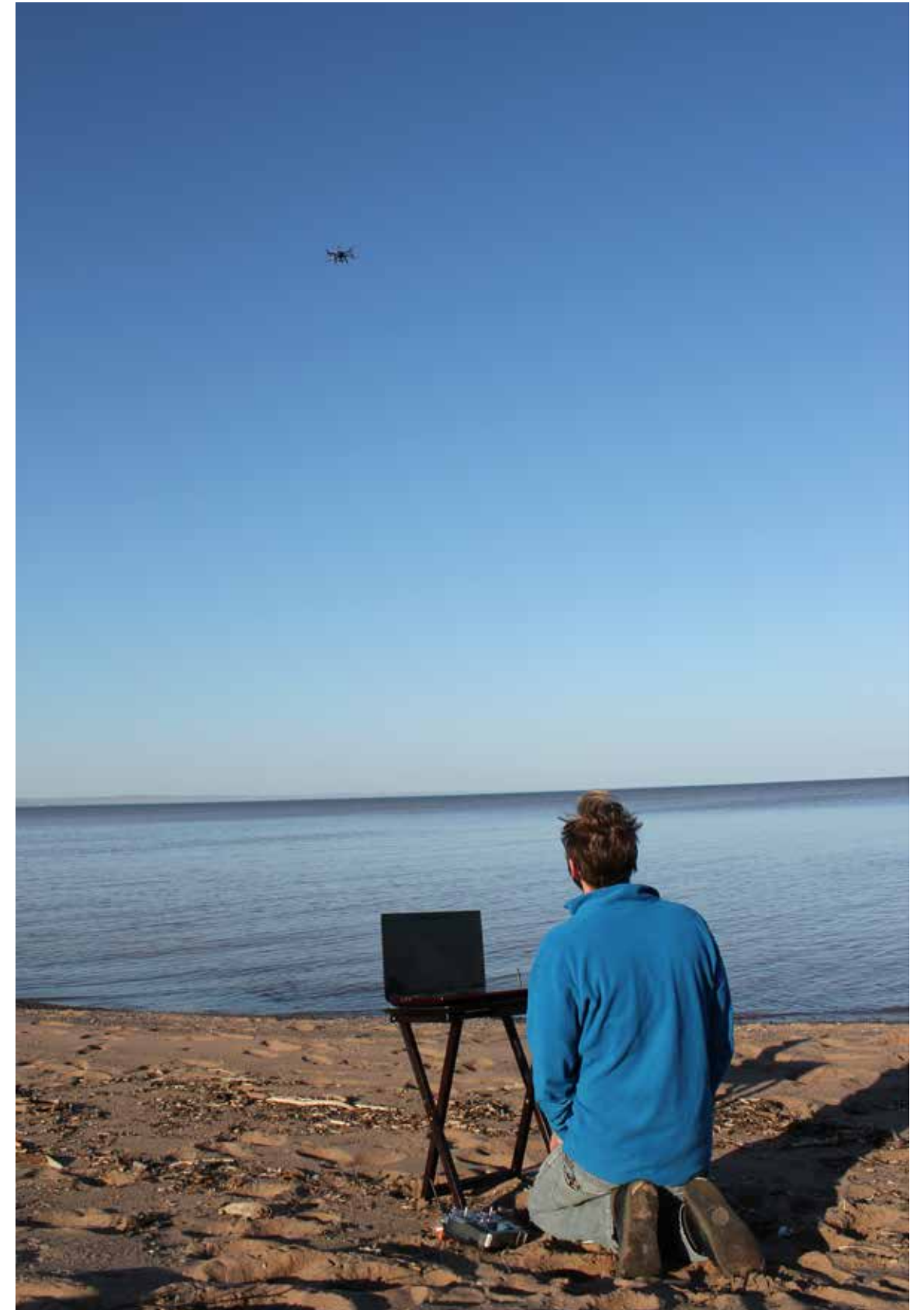






*46°41'58.365" lat. -91°59'49.0128" long. @ 30m (2015)*

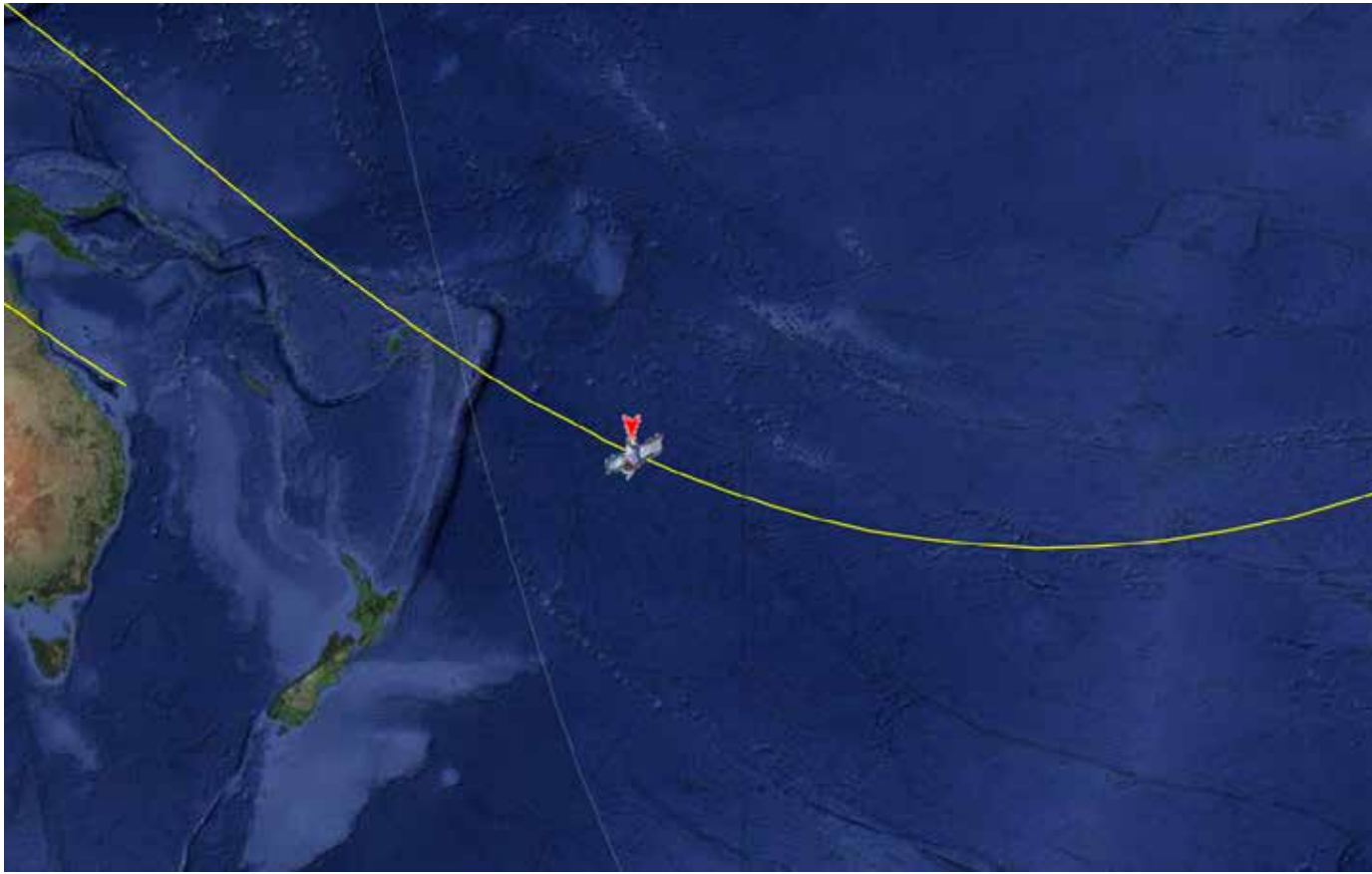
The title of this work refers to the source location where the water surface data were collected for this series. An autonomous aerial vehicle hovering 30 meters above Lake Superior captured still images of the water's surface. For this series of five, the vehicle was deployed to the same location on different days and in different weather conditions. The collected images were converted into three-dimensional models using open-source software. The models were then carved with a CNC router into a series of clear acrylic cylinders. This process captured the dynamic movements of the waves and ripples from a specific time and location and suspended this ever-changing water pattern into a static transparent form.



Photograph by Kristina Estell



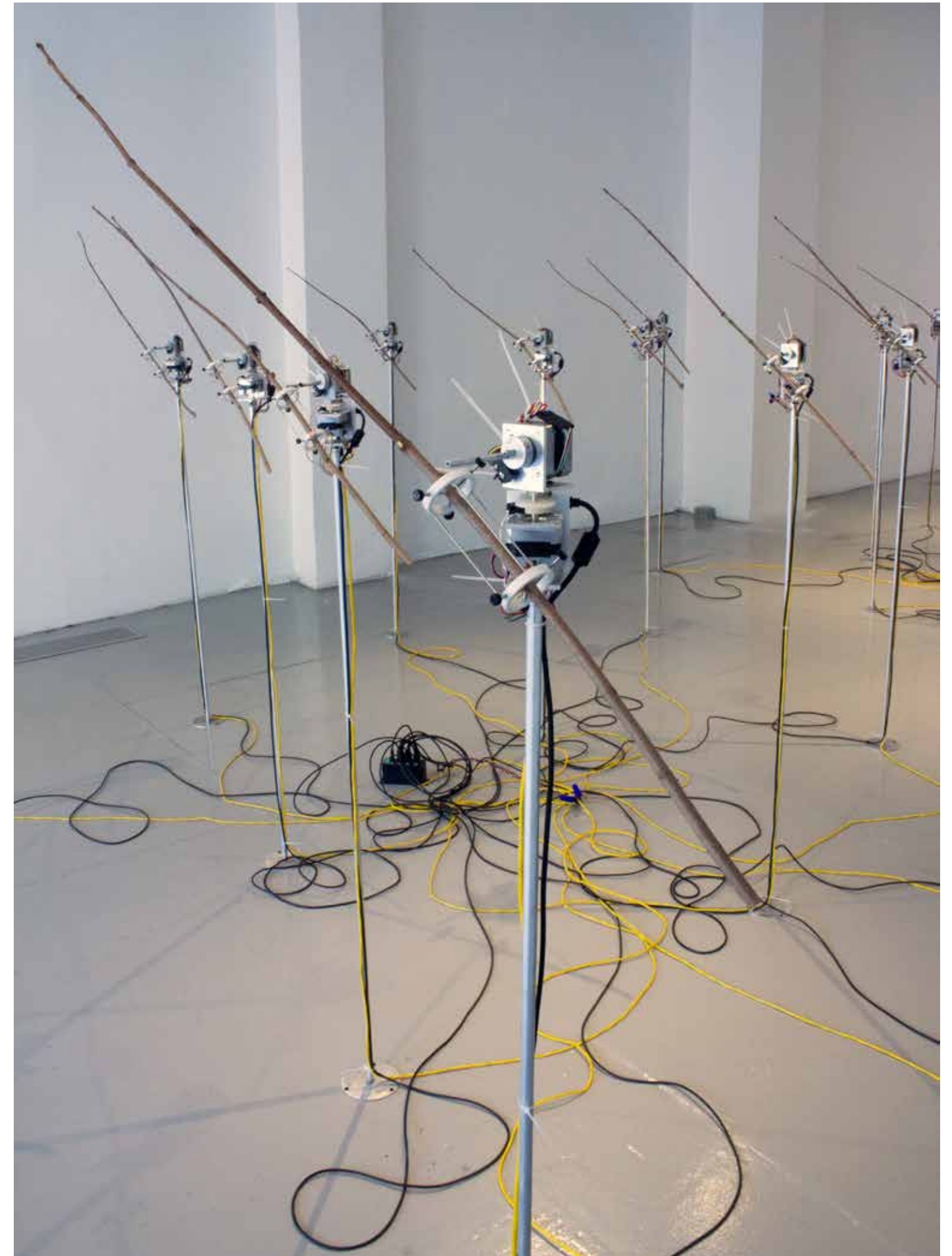




Photograph: N2YO.com

### *SPACEJUNK* (2016)

The fifty twigs in this installation point in unison in the direction of the oldest piece of human-made space debris currently above the horizon. The debris being tracked are spent rocket bodies, parts from defunct satellites, and wayward tools launched in missions as far back as 1958. When the piece of debris being tracked drops below the installation's horizon, the twigs go to a rested downward pointing position and await the next debris to appear. The composition is continually changing as it tracks the oldest discarded objects orbiting the earth that enter its point of view.











David Bowen is a studio artist and educator whose work explores intersections between natural and mechanical systems. His work has recently been featured in group exhibitions at Eyebeam, Brooklyn, New York; Centre for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB); ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany; Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan; Fundación Telefónica, Madrid; Seoul Museum of Art; Lentos Kunstmuseum, Linz, Austria; NTT InterCommunication Center (ICC), Tokyo; and in one-person exhibitions at the Minneapolis Institute of Art; Laboratoria Art & Science Space, Moscow; and Vox Populi, Philadelphia. Bowen is a recent recipient of a McKnight Visual Artist Fellowship and in the past has received awards from the Japan Media Arts Festival, Ars Electronica, and the Vida Art and Artificial Life international competition. Bowen is currently an associate professor of sculpture and physical computing at the University of Minnesota Duluth. [www.davidbowen.com](http://www.davidbowen.com)

Published in association with the  
McKnight Visual Artist Fellowship.  
Edition of 25, 2016.