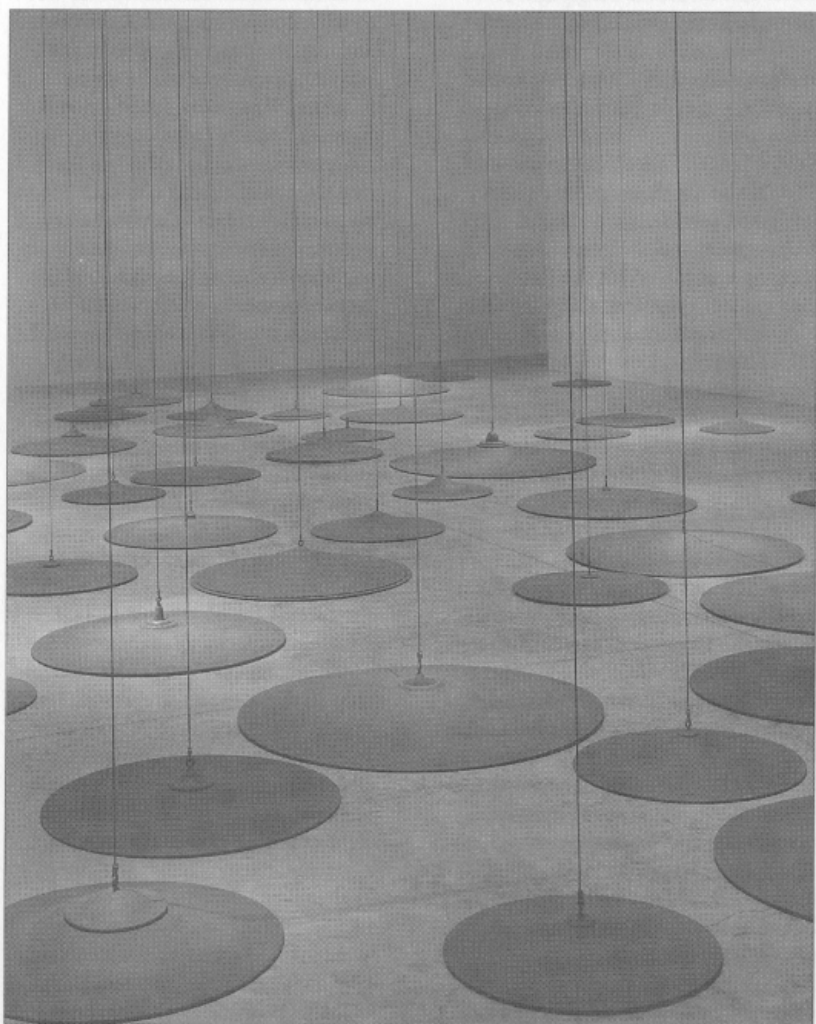


Peter Shelton
MATRIX/Berkeley 177

University of California
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Pacific Film Archive
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Peter Shelton, *sixtyslippers*, 1997

Peter Shelton bases his work on dualities and reversals. In his multi-part sculptural ensembles, abstract and graphic elements coexist, heavy objects float, hard surfaces look soft (and vice versa). Shelton's works exist in an area where the body meets space and sculpture intersects with architecture. Despite physical and architectural references, his installations are not narrative. Instead, they derive meaning through metaphor and interaction.

Shelton's art has evolved over twenty years, yet even his earliest environmental pieces like *SWEATHOUSEandlittleprincipals* (1979) contain elements that still intrigue him—elements such as architectural and sculptural objects, hanging and placed on the floor, ranging from the abstract to the obviously referential. *floatinghouse-DEADMAN* of 1985-1986 is one of his most memorable works. It shares aspects of *SWEATHOUSEandlittleprincipals* with the added element of a complex system of balance and counterbalance. The floating house of the title is a paper and wood structure held slightly aloft by a series of weights, known as deadmen in construction lingo. Like *floatinghouse*, the sixty metal cones of *sixtyslippers* are suspended from the ceiling by cables, and likewise seem to deny the gravitational pull on their considerable weight as they hover lightly just above the floor. They are, in effect, pendulums in perpetual, gentle movement.

sixtyslippers at first looks distinct in Shelton's oeuvre in its apparent simplicity and formal unity. Shelton refuted that initial response in a recent interview in which he notes that *sixtyslippers* represents a component (Shelton uses the term "valence") of his work that is always present but rarely foregrounded. When Shelton was a student in

Southern California during the 1970s, the reigning styles were minimalism and conceptualism. He was influenced by both—as well as by the experiential nature of Southern California's light and space version of minimalism—but, like his immediate predecessors Eva Hesse, Joel Shapiro, and Bruce Nauman, he was not satisfied with an approach that rejected the figurative and emotive sides of art. Shelton wanted his art to tell us something about ourselves and our environment, specifically how a body relates to the spaces it inhabits. While conceptual artists of his generation were trying to do away with, or at least diminish, the importance of the art object, Shelton set about developing a vocabulary of evocative forms. How things are put together and how they function were so important to him that he became a certified welder.

So while *sixtyslippers* displays a minimalist repetition of closely related units, in fact, in profile or weight, no two of Shelton's "slippers" are alike. And while the installation contains no graphic somatic references, we become intensely aware of our bodies as we chart our course through the forest of cables. Finally, though *sixtyslippers* lacks an architectural structure, its very particular relationship to the complex architecture of the museum heightens our sense of the building—its configuration, the concrete material of which it is constructed, and the changing natural light coming through the windows.

Is the piece "Zenlike," "breathtaking," "serene," as observers have written? It is true that Shelton's field of slowly swaying geometrical elements is pleasing to that part of us that responds to formal austerity and subtle effects, but if this were all that one derived from the work, Shelton would feel it was incomplete. As in most of his ensembles,

this piece depends for its full effect on physical interaction with it, not just observation, and this can be less agreeable. In the past this has meant crawling through a structure, sitting in a water-filled, glass chair, or putting one's head into a box. Being in the midst of the moving field of *sixtyslippers* is disorienting and disconcerting. We are reminded that we are not on stable ground, in either a real sense (one need only to think of earthquake) or metaphorically.

Shelton was born in Ohio in 1951, and received a B.A. from Pomona College in 1973 and M.F.A. from UCLA in 1979. He has exhibited his installations and individual sculptures throughout the United States and abroad, most recently at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin. Last year Shelton was a fellow at the Henry Moore Sculpture Trust in Halifax, England, where he created the still-in-progress *blackelephanthouse*. He is represented by the L.A. Louver Gallery.

Constance Lewallen

Work in MATRIX:
sixtyslippers, 1997
60 cast iron cones
18-48" diameter

Selected one-person exhibitions:
Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, *godspipes*, '98; Dean Clough, Henry Moore Sculpture Trust, Halifax, England, *blackelephanthouse*, '98 (catalogue); Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, *oldwetbrickhouse*, '97; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *bottlesbonesandthingsgetwet*, '94 (catalogue); Louver Gallery, New York, *thingsgetwet: a work in progress*, '93; Gallery Sperone, Rome, Italy, '92; L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, CA, *monstermaw-baggiheaderhead, shirts*, '91; Des Moines Art Center, Iowa, *Waxworks*, '88-89 (catalogue); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, *BLACKVAULTfallstone*, '88 (catalogue); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, *HARDSTRETCHdroop. TUBtubesandpipes*, '87 (catalogue); *floatinghouseDEADMAN*, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, '86 (catalogue).

Selected group exhibitions:
Tate Gallery Liverpool and The Henry Moore Sculpture Institute, England, *Art Transpennine* '98, '98 (catalogue); Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall, Sweden, *Spatiotemporal*, '98 (catalogue); Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *From Head to Toe: Concepts of the Body in Twentieth Century Art*, '98; Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, Germany, *Prospectus 93*, '93 (catalogue); Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Selections from the Contemporary Collection*, '92; Museo Cantonale D'Art, Lugano, Switzerland, *Panza Di Buimo: The Eighties and the Nineties from the Collection*, '92 (catalogue); Sezon Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan, *Individual Realities in the California Art Scene*, '91 (catalogue); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, *Sculpture: Inside Outside*, '88 (catalogue); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles,

Striking Distance, '88; Museum of Modern Art, Bologna, Italy, *Anniottanta*, '85 (catalogue); Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, *Aperto '84*, '84 (catalogue); Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, *Une Experience Museographique*, '82-83 (catalogue).

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