



Above  
Helen Mirra, *5th Walking Comma*,  
2nd October, Cortina,  
2013, photograph  
with text on paper,  
28 x 43 cm

Gianni Pettena,  
*Human Wall* (detail),  
2012–17, clay,  
dimensions variable

## GIANNI PETTENA & HELEN MIRRA Merano Arte, Italy

Curated by Christiane Rekade and impeccably installed at Merano Arte (a small kunsthalle in the eponymous Italian town, which borders Austria), ‘Gianni Pettena: Natural Architecture’ and ‘Helen Mirra: Walking, Weaving’ are two distinct solo shows with overlapping, site-specific edges.

Born in 1940 in the nearby city of Bolzano, Pettena spent only the first years of his life in South Tyrol. Nevertheless, the landscapes of the Dolomites, engraved in his childhood memories, became a lifelong paradigm: he describes mountains as his ‘school of architecture’. A protagonist of radical architecture in Italy and a member of Global Tools (an experimental group active from 1973–75, who wished to rethink education, ecology, community, technology, arts and crafts), Pettena often turned to art, performance and ephemeral installations to shape – and shake – the public sphere. ‘Natural Architecture’ restages seven previous projects. The most visible and monumental are *Paper* (2017, after a 1971 installation at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design) – a cascade of white paper strips flowing down three floors and across the central lobby of the building – and *Human Wall* (2012–17),

an expanse of fresh clay moulded by hand that recalls *Clay House*, a 1972 intervention in Salt Lake City, where Pettena covered a friend’s suburban house in the same material, thus turning it, quite literally, into an earthwork. By contrast, *Breathing Architecture* (1999/2017), a ‘cut’ that uncovers the ancient stone wall beneath the contemporary one, is almost imperceptible.

If Pettena looks back, Mirra (born in 1970 in Rochester and based in California) is immersed in the here and now. ‘Walking, Weaving’ includes works generated by these two intertwined activities during the artist’s month-long residency in Merano. Mirra translated her outdoor experiences into minimal, elegant linen and wool textiles in bright, natural shades. Woven indoors on a portable loom fixed to an easel, these works do, in fact, look like abstract paintings. Walks play a crucial role in Mirra’s life and practice; on her website she defines herself as ‘a walking experiment’, quoting ‘Mountains and Waters Sutra’ (1240) by Zen master Eihei Dogen: ‘all mountains ride on clouds / and walk in the sky [...] all mountains walk with their toes on all waters / and splash there’. The exhibition’s first room opens with a broken metre stick that Mirra found on a trail (*12 July, Lana – Vigiliujoch*, 2017): it is cracked at 167 cm and installed at the same height, which is Mirra’s own, as if to signal the refusal to adopt customary means for measuring time and space. It also embodies, I think, the tension between precision and discipline, and the desire to move beyond them, which lies at the root of Mirra’s research. Here, for instance, the text *Variable Error* (2017) explains the self-imposed rules of the trip that brought the artist from Amsterdam to Merano on foot and by train. The decision was made every morning after tossing a coin – in homage to Douglas Huebler’s series ‘Variable Piece (In Process)’ (1971–97), one of Mirra’s favourite peripatetic artists, together with Stanley Broun and André Cadere. Weaving becomes another way to record time, weather and the artist’s inner movements and is even more concise than poetry, which is incorporated into Mirra’s earlier works (‘Dandelion puffs in the low morning air’, *Field Index, Emilia Romagna*, 2011; ‘Pair of young goats, one rubbing its horn on my knees’, *Walking Commas, 2 October, Cortina*, 2013, both on view). *Mountain Otherwise* (2017) is composed of two luminous, irregular colour fields (blue and white, mountains and water, solid and liquid) that are woven together. Although it doesn’t explicitly mirror nature, somehow it makes you breathe it in.

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