

Art Larson

THE SHADOW OF THE FLATLANDER

Art Larson (San Diego, 1962) interrogates the relationship between the work we see and the artist who created it. He highlights the outsider's perspective, the observer who recognizes himself in the overlooked. He showcases the residue of ordinary moments, accumulated over a lifetime, and the artist's shadow that leaves no trace on the landscape, yet is a part of it.

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The career of Art Larson (San Diego, 1962) defies any attempt at pigeonholing and even questions the drive (specific to the field of art) to gain prestige from being analysed by a critical literature.

The themes that appear in *The Shadow of the Flatlander* include failed expectations, misunderstanding as an epistemological basis, eschatology, and the artist's social position. The title alludes to the amusement—a far from frivolous political humour—that categorizes Larson's approach to most of his works.

One can see in these works a rejection of big decisions and definitive projects; to paraphrase the title of the book by Larson's compatriot Susan Sontag, everything depends where the stress falls. However, intensity also means moving through apparently contradictory territories, between unfinished or amateur works and formal virtuosity, between comic performance and video documents.

The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy wrote in *The Inoperative Community* (1983) that inoperativeness does not entail inaction but rather a plea to produce, through undetectable positions, a work from anywhere and through any material, with the aim of discarding two quintessential ontological questions: What is this? What does this mean?

We can say that this drive is observed in Art Larson's proposals, which can be understood not only because of their processual nature but above all because of what distances them from a coherent or seamless discourse.

It is thus precisely the remains that prevent art from closing in on itself, exulting within its limits. Larson somehow operates with the remains, through which he achieves a modifiable language, a language that leaps from sensitivity to humour, from the fragile to the inappropriate.

On viewing the works that make up *The Shadow of the Flatlander*, one wonders what would become of museums if they had not rejected tentative forms, if, instead of em-

bracing a host of dogmatisms, they had initiated a sort of journey to nowhere, an odyssey from all places and from none in particular.

SHADOW OF THE FLATLANDER

Leslie Larson

Flatlander is a regional colloquialism in Southern California, where Art Larson was born and raised, that means an outsider, someone visiting a locale different from his own, a place where the customs and traditions are unfamiliar. A stranger, an outsider, someone who isn't comfortable in his surroundings, who is awkward as he tries to grasp codes he doesn't completely understand. An observer, someone who stands to the side and watches. In this case, as in many others, an artist.

Larson embraces this persona in his work, where the silence of the artist, his refusal to comment or participate, becomes a presence in itself. This is the artist's shadow, which imposes itself on the landscape without shaping it. It's a shifting shape, changing position according to the movement of the sun across the sky, which elongates, shortens, or disappears entirely depending on the time of day and the existence or absence of light. The presence is constant, though we feel it without knowing its contours. Who is holding the camera? Why is our attention being directed to a particular object? What is the relationship between the work we see and the artist who created it? Larson lets us ask our own questions, giving few signposts to point our direction. We are met by the silence of the observer, who reveals little about himself, relying on the transitory presence of his shadow, defined only by what it sees.

Shadow of the Flatlander is not the work of a young artist, looking to make his mark. It is the work of an artist in midlife, the result of an accumulation of moments, of time, of events. Of steady dedication to observing and recording, of taking the long view of an artistic career, laying it down piece by piece, working through it day by day. The passage of time is central. Standing still and watching the unfolding of moments, days, and years. A patience. A studied concentration on the daily and the ordinary, of finding the extraordinary in the commonplace. Of isolating and amplifying the overlooked marvels

of routine life and mundane landscapes. It gives the work a nostalgia bordering on melancholy, and also a sense of humor. A pleasure in the natural world, in familiar landscapes and ordinary objects. Not the grand gesture or the big splash, but the accretion of small events that make up a life. A work of art. The persistent wearing of water against stone.

Trees 2010 - present

Trees is a series of videos that Larson has been shooting with a handheld camera since 2010. Each segment focuses on a single tree, identified only by its GPS coordinates. For the most part, the trees are not spectacular. They do not stand out from their surroundings. They are not remarkable: in general, they are not the largest, or most unusual, or most beautiful—in fact, we often wonder what it is about this particular tree that warrants our attention. This, I suspect is the point. The tree appears in the middle distance. The only camera movement comes from the unsteadiness of the artist's hand.

The insistence of a fixed focus on the tree is uncomfortable. We are used to panning, to glancing, to jumping from one object to the next. To moving on when we lose interest in something. Our mind floods with questions. We look for some point of reference. What kind of tree is it? Where is it? What's so special about this tree? Why was it chosen? Are we missing something? Why must we stay here this long?

Larson's response is silence. He leaves our minds free to wonder, to wander.

At some point our perceptions shift, and our minds quiet. We feel the breeze that that plays through the leaves and branches of the tree. We notice the birdsong, the dog barking in the distance, the jet moving across the sky. Sometimes a human voice, the noise of an engine, music from a distant radio. Rarely, the shadow of the artist fall onto the ground. We feel his presence. He is watching, too. Waiting, it seems. He is part of the landscape, as are we.

We are free to become the trees, who now look back at us. We sense their thereness. We get a feel for their world, the life that passes around them as they remain rooted to the spot. The tractor journeying to the fields, a man on his way to work. The rising sun, the waning light, the coming darkness. What it means to stand still, how to isolate a few moments in the stream of time. And then, abruptly, the scene switches. A different tree, a different landscape. A new day. A new set of questions.

Calendars

Calendars spans three years, from 2018 to 2020. Each of the twelve months of each year is illustrated with a drawing, for a total of 36. The dates and days of the week on each grid are hand lettered in Larson's spidery penciled scrawl.

The calendar represents a point of reference in time, a projection into the future, and a record of the past. It is, as Larson himself points out, sometimes the only object of art in the household. It is mass produced and distributed free by businesses and organizations, and commercially created and sold around themes—cities, sports, animals, painters—to millions worldwide.

Larson's calendars offer a crucial departure. Each page is original, the work of a single hand and mind. They straddle the dichotomy of personal and private, of permanent and disposable. They are a public posting, available to anyone who cares to look, yet they refer to events and concerns that remain opaque to the uninformed observer. The drawings have the air of private musings. Some are architectural, draftsman-like in their execution. A floorplan for an outdoor landscape, a niche for displaying a camera. Abstract sketches, landscapes, buildings. The 2019 calendar is a series of mountains—blue skies, gentle snowy slopes—interspersed with black-and-white drawings of gritty street scenes. A dumpster, a phone pole, a barren parking lot. Each sketch is lovingly and thoughtfully

rendered. There is a tenderness in the juxtaposition, as Larson fully captures the serenity, the stark presence of these opposing scenes. Yet we wonder: how are these scenes connected, if at all? What meaning do they occupy in Larson's interior landscape?

The calendar entries are equally enigmatic. As with *Trees*, there is an almost stubborn insistence on the ordinary. Recorded in faint pencil, the events are largely impersonal rather than intimate. Appointments, work schedules. Once in a while a name appears, an event that jumps out as personal: the spouse's hospitalization, the daughter's surgery. A massage. A birthday. A vacation. Those events are rare, however. They give us little to go on, and we are once again left with questions. What is the relation of the drawing to the month it represents? To the other drawings? To the seasons and time of year? To what is going on in the artist's life? What does he want us to see? Why doesn't he tell us? What is he hiding?

The cohesiveness is Larson's refusal to impose hierarchies, to assign importance, and to privilege one moment or one scene over another. He leaves it up to us. The scenes he portrays don't focus on the facades of buildings, on distinctive architecture or prominent constructions. They are the backlots, the alleys, the ordinary objects—the trashcans and loading docks—we take for granted. Larson bestows on them the same attention usually granted to what it commonly considered to be loftier subjects—skies, mountains, trees—and says wait a minute, take another look. He brings to life what is usually overlooked and says this is worthy of my attention, and of ours. It is the outsider's perspective, the observer who recognizes himself in the overlooked, who feels at home in an environment where no one is paying attention.

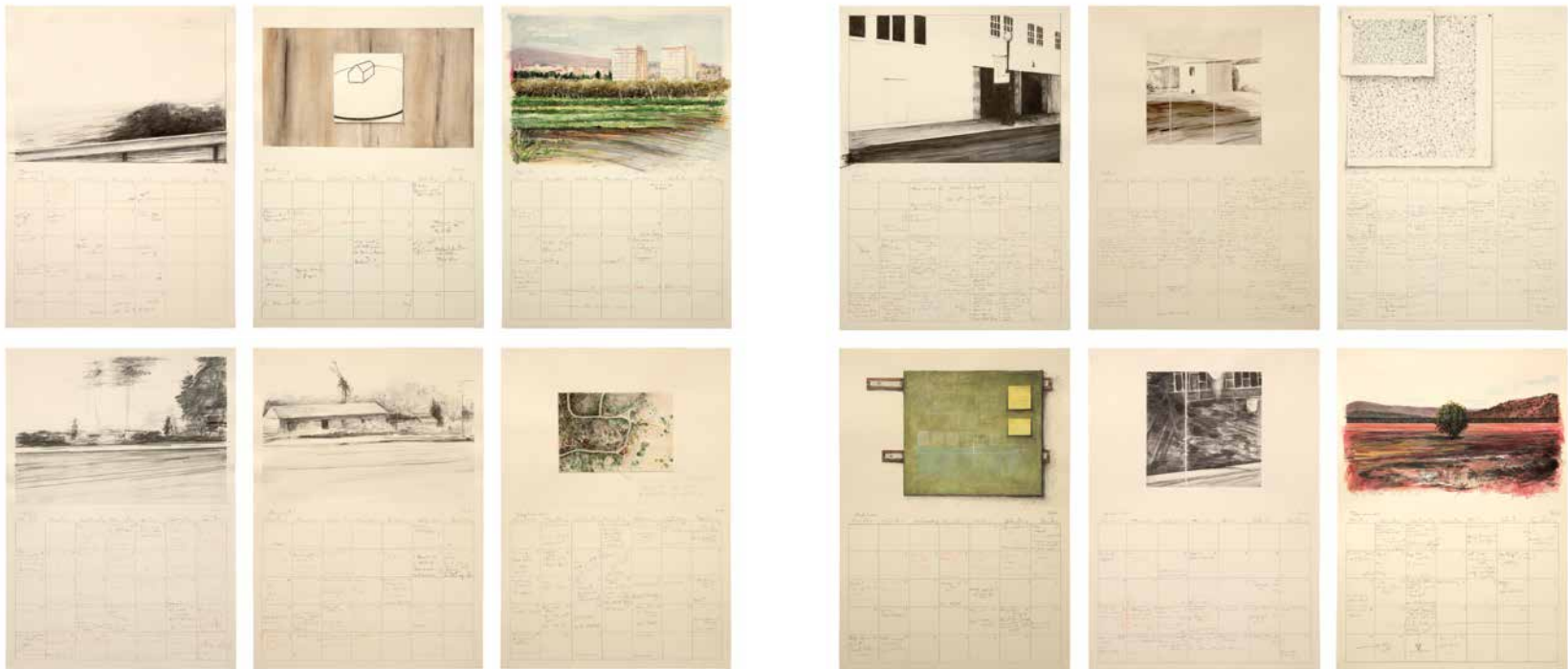
There's a certain courage in revealing a life like this, a daring in making art out of it. To lay out the daily tasks as nothing extraordinary, but to show how the accumulation, even the residue, taken together, adds up to something original, permanent. To stand to the side, to take yourself out of the picture. To point to what has left an impression, made its



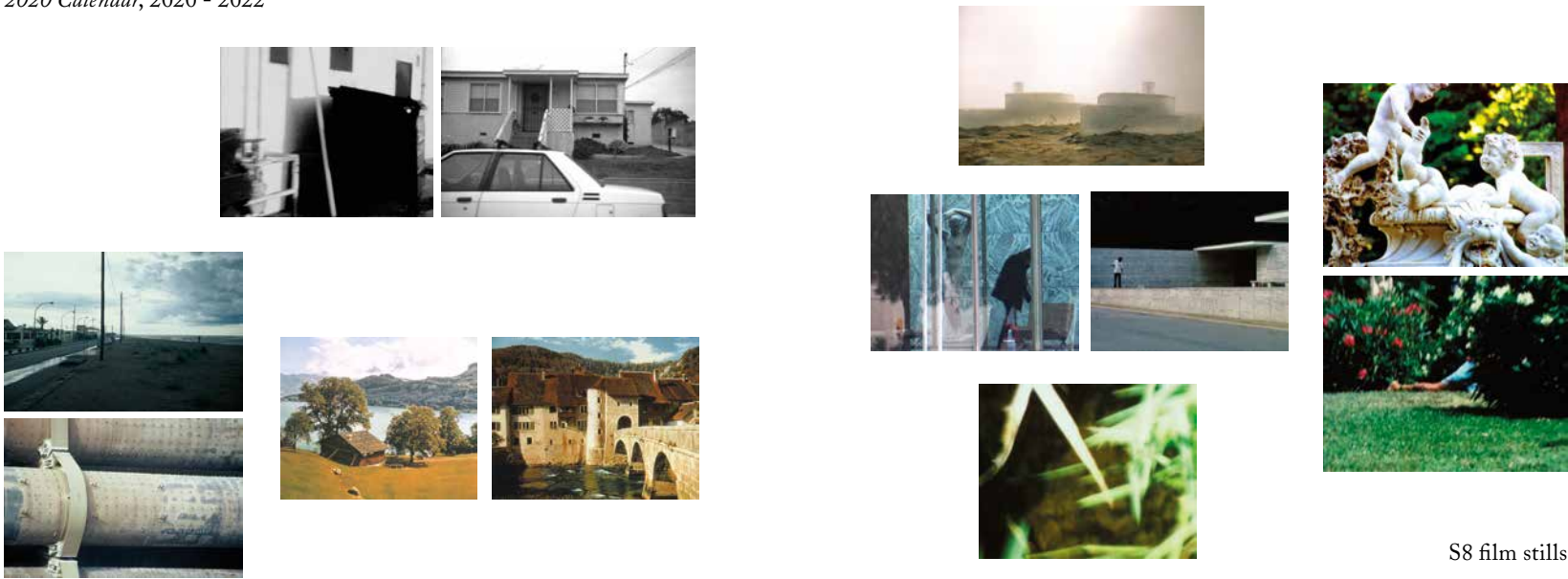
Different ways to focus, 2021 - 2022



Trees, 2010 - present



2020 Calendar, 2020 - 2022



S8 film stills



Present Perfect, 2001



The Great Friends, 2002



Video d'autor, 2004 - 2006



Videos

mark. To leave us to draw our own conclusions. Entries that are marked in pencil, underlining how transitory they are. Concerns that are anticipated, executed, forgotten—or not. Calendars that are thrown away at the end of the year. Squares of time. Days that begin and end. What will be forgotten? What will be remembered? How does it all add up?

Present Perfect

In *Present Perfect*, where Larson “explains all of the snapshots he owns,” we see the humor of the artist. We also see the artist himself, for the first time. Though, not really. The photos are from the past. Larson as a young man, with family members, with friends and lovers who have entered and exited his life. He is no longer the person who lives in the houses he shows us, inhabits the rooms in the photos, or is present in the trips he took. He has changed. He has become a different person.

As with Larson’s other work, the photos seem random, only thinly connected to each other, collected here because they’re “all he owns.” A chair that has been reupholstered, a bathroom repair, a barbeque, a dog. Larson’s father, sister, cousins. Exes, lots of exes. The artist’s and other people’s, underscoring how time and emotions have changed from these frozen moments, have moved on. Babies who have grown, people who have gotten old, who have died. Love affairs that have withered and died.

Larson places each photo onto a scratched wooden surface and describes it in an offhand way, providing an abbreviated context for each snap. Humor bubbles under the surface, as well as emotion, which is kept in check. The most revealing moment comes when he describes one summer’s vacation in California where “I basically made a pig of myself.” This confession, along with subsequent remarks about his own behavior is striking not only because for the first time he places himself in the scene, but because we are asked to view the subject overlaid with Larson’s opinion, in this case with disapproval and disgust.

In another photo, he remarks, "This is right after I lost my finger." In another of the artist's father, he says, "Big gut there." Tantalizing tidbits that turn our attention away from what is being observed, and toward the artist himself. We want more, but Larson gives the same weight to inanimate objects as he does to self-examination. He flips to the next photo: "This is our bathroom when I was fixing the place up. As you can see, there were quite a few problems with humidity." Part of the humor of the project comes from the pretended assumption that the viewer understands the context: the names, the faces, the locations, and the relationship they bear to each other. Part comes from the dismissive undertone, the flattening of the important and nonimportant. Throwaway comments that leave us, once again, wondering. Time is not chronological. Larson's father appears in a shot when the artist is grown, in a later photo before Larson is born. The connective tissue between the photos is missing. We are left with an impression of disjointedness, of events and emotions that come and go haphazardly. Once again, Larson refuses to exert control over the events, to order them, to explain how they are connected. He leaves us to draw our own conclusions.

We return once again to the flatlander, to the one who doesn't quite understand how things work—in this case even in his own life. He observes his past self as someone whose actions are unaccountable. He is no longer that person. He is left piecing it together from these scrapes, places and people he once knew. A tree closely observed, one of many, rooted to its spot, now existing out of view. Appointments on a calendar, once noteworthy, now unimportant. What remains? Who is the person remembering? What has he become? The residue of these moments, accumulated over a lifetime. The shadow that leaves no trace on the landscape, yet is a part of it.

THE ITINERARY OF A TRAVELLING ARTIST

Amélie de Turckheim

6 a.m.,
Tecalote Canyon, San Diego, California.

But it could be
6 a.m.,
The Massif des Alpilles, Provence, France.

Or
6 a.m.,
The hills of Dubrovnik, Croatia,
The moors of Vauville, Cotentin, France,
Collserola, the hills behind Barcelona,

or
Saint-Véran in the Queyras, France.

This list is not a test for elementary school students but rather a list of some of the countless places that Art Larson has travelled to over the years and that form the starting point of his work.

It all begins with walks, long walks during which Art observes and appraises the places he passes through.

With these walks begins a ritual. Art goes out in the morning, very early, when time stands still and everything is incredibly quiet, carrying his camera, a microphone and wearing a good pair of shoes. He walks for a long time, whatever the weather, regardless of his mood and whatever the landscape: canyons, mountains, fields, semi-industrial landscapes or rivers. He walks briskly but with a firm step. He lets himself go, with no plan, itinerary or precise destination. In the course of his wanderings, he may come across wild boar hunters,

*tweakers*¹ crashed out under their makeshift shelters along the San Diego River, migrants in the Bois de Vincennes, joggers in mini shorts, rattlesnakes, raccoons or coyotes on Californian trails. Some are suspicious and wonder: Is he a stalker... a predator? But Art doesn't care, he's in his own world. He's just passing through.

He crosses the landscape, a small point in the immensity of the world, steps on the sand, the earth, the grass, the rock... Devouring the kilometers in osmosis with the atmosphere of the places to which his walks take him. And suddenly he finds what he is looking for: a tree attracts his attention, one of many, oak, pine or beech. Aware of this simultaneous attraction, he allows himself to be carried away. By reflex, almost automatically, he takes out his camera and starts filming the tree. Two parallel realities, two living beings standing perpendicular to the earth's surface, facing each other with only a lens between them. He films it from a fixed angle, listening to the rustling of the leaves, the creak of the branches, the song of the birds, the hum of a tractor in the distance. Among this abundance of sound and sensation, there is also the silence that underlies this incredible soundscape. So, he films until his arms start to tremble, until his body gives way and he can no longer keep the tree framed in the camera's viewfinder. It's as if it were his tree, anchored in the ground. He experiences this moment of grace intensely, outside time, aware of the power of what he is feeling.

And suddenly, as quickly as it had appeared, the spell is broken. Art puts his camera away. The tree has been captured, and he geolocates it so that he can pin it later on Google Earth. That moment of osmosis has remained behind him, but also in him; he can resume his walk. Sometimes Art walks for days at a time and finds nothing to film, but he says "that's part of the process".

Why trees? "It's not that I like them more than anything else, but they give me a purpose, something to look for, everything is unexpected, I wander like Alice in Wonder-

¹ A methamphetamine addict.

land. Even in places I've known for many years, I'm always surprised. My view of things is never the same and I discover something new. It's important to have these moments of solitude. Filming the trees justifies the walks."

"It may seem absurd to film trees. But that's how it is. What I like is the process. Art makes me do things I wouldn't do in my ordinary life. It's something similar to what Marcel Duchamp said when asked why he made art: "Because art shows me how to live my life."

No further explanations are given. It is not necessary, everything is said in his work: "It's what I do, what I have to do, what feels good to me, that's all."

Art is well aware of this indisputable link with the natural environment. As a teenager in California, he used to get up before dawn to take his surfboard to Sunset Cliffs, San Diego. He watched the sea for a long time. He scanned the waves, the foam of the surf, sniffed the iodized breeze, moved his toes in the sand... And then he jumped into the water, paddled out to sea and waited, waited patiently in the gloom of dawn for the moment when, moved by that strange, divine instinct of surfers, he stood up on a wave that was breaking against the shore. Sensations of weightlessness, of floating and flying. Seconds that extend to infinity, of being and not being. These moments of grace must be experienced; no explanation can convey the sensations that accompany them.

Surfing is synonymous with music. It's almost self-evident, especially when you grow up on the West Coast of the United States. Art listens to a lot of music all the time, including jazz, bluegrass, country, folk, classical, experimental, rock, punk, pop-rock and reggae. Forty years later, the music is still there. In his studio in Barcelona, he feeds on muesli and music. He waits for the wave of inspiration by warming up through a ritual developed over the years. He does this by drawing, ordering, sharpening his innumerable colored pencils, filing photos... putting aside his intellect and mind and letting his hands take charge and guide him in his work. If nothing comes, it's no great tragedy. He goes out for a walk,

runs errands, has a cortado² while reading the newspaper, before picking up his daughter from school.

While working, Art generally is not thinking of others. His work is not addressed to anyone in particular, no one is really expecting it. He creates without a pre-established program, without any specific reference or to please anyone: “I don’t want what I do to become just another boring job. I already have a job” To which he adds: “What I do takes too much time to make a living out of it. I’m perfectly comfortable with the idea of not working in my studio every day. I don’t judge anyone, to each his own. It’s just that I just need to live enriching moments in order to make work which interests me.”

He says that work doesn’t have to be professional to be interesting. It reminds me again of Marcel Duchamp, who said: “You can be an artist without being anything in particular.” So, Art is just doing it. He dreams of being a retiree in his studio with his music and his mug, savoring the pleasure of being able to create for more time and with fewer distractions.

“The art world is so small, while the world is so big,” he says. “I was never good at being a professional artist. When I was young, I was naive enough to fantasize about living in a New York loft where I would paint all day every day. There are artists who know how to navigate well the world of collectors and galleries, but that’s not exactly my specialty.”

So why create? “Because it’s what suits me, what I feel a need to do, and it goes beyond explanations and justifications. What I draw is related to my real life. The shadow that appears in one of my calendars comes from the last images of a video of a tree that I was recording, although I try not to make my shadow appear in the field. I represent that little chaos, the unexpected.”

Art is not a man of words. He lets himself be carried away by the unexpected, and his imagination and his desire to create are rooted in his life experiences. There’s nothing more to say—just let yourself be captured by what emanates from his work. Living without trying to understand, exactly like him.

² An espresso coffee with milk.

Curator: Valentín Roma

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**Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday
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#ArtLarson

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