Starting in the 1960s in rural Nebraska, Emery Blagdon (1908–1986) built an increasingly dense environment filled with sculptures made of baling wire and aluminum foil, brightly colored paintings, hand-painted lightbulbs, salts, and other organic matter. Impacted by personal tragedy, Blagdon worked for nearly thirty years on this constantly changing installation—“The Healing Machine”—designed to channel the earth’s energies to alleviate pain and illness. Believing he was unusually sensitive to electrical currents, Blagdon eagerly explored the curative potential of electricity.

After Blagdon’s death, the pharmacist who had helped him years before—Dan Dryden—returned for a visit to find Blagdon gone and his entire oeuvre up for sale. With friends, Dryden bought and preserved The Healing Machine and the pieces left in Blagdon’s workshop. In 2004, Kohler Foundation acquired The Healing Machine as Blagdon had last left it, consisting of some four hundred individual components. In 2007, following a major conservation initiative, Kohler Foundation gave Blagdon’s Healing Machine to the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.
How were you first introduced to the work of Emery Blagdon?

I was first introduced to the work of Emery Blagdon when I was working as a graduate student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in a class on visionary artists and artist-built environments. I didn’t see the installation in person until I came up to the Arts Center to see Sublime Spaces and Visionary Worlds in 2007.

How does your own background inform your response to Blagdon’s work?

What always enchanted me about Blagdon's work was how it was conceived as this ongoing cumulative place, wherein the act of making was just as important as space itself in its intent to heal. The connection between the making and the made with The Healing Machine is so profound for me. This connects to my thinking about craft in that the motivation to make is embedded with meaning, both in the process of “doing” as well as the actual objects themselves.

Shannon R. Stratton, the William and Mildred Lasdon Chief Curator at the Museum of Arts and Design, collaborated with the Arts Center to bring in Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe (1914–2000) and the commissioning of a new sound piece by Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe (NY).

I have been working with the idea of craft and its relevance to social practice and self-care and am seeing the connection between craft and its relevance to social practice and self-care.

As an artist, curator, and writer, Stratton is emphasizing the notion of atmosphere, yet little has been written about this concept in art. At the 1986 exhibition Atmosphere for Enjoyment: Harry Bertoia’s Environment for Sound at the Museum of Arts and Design (NYC) and incorporated commissions by contemporary sound artists and musicians. Lizzib Bougatsos and Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe were invited to the Bertoia Barn in Pennsylvania to make new recordings on the Sonambient sculptures and do further performances at the museum. The sculptures made by Harry Bertoia’s son, Val Bertoia, are intended to capture and distill energy, Bertoia’s monotypes look like sound waves or a rendering of the space-time continuum. His Sonambient sculptures appear to reach out to catch the surrounding invisible currents of air. While Bertoia also installed his sculptures in his barn, the sounds those sculptures make that contribute to a sense of awe. It is interesting to think about what is the spatial in art environments. Beyond the actual architecture, I think this might have to with ideas of atmosphere or, as the Germans call it, stimmung.

I think Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht writes beautifully about this concept in his book Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature. In it, he considers the effects of presence as an aesthetic experience. Blagdon and Bertoia are making work that is all about the effect of presence, their work produces atmospheres and moods that cannot be rationalized as much as experienced and felt.

I think something curators don’t get to do enough at museums is to bring in musicians. Lizzi Bougatsos and Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe were invited to the Bertoia Barn in Pennsylvania to make new recordings on the Sonambient sculptures and do further performances at the museum. The sculptures made by Harry Bertoia’s son, Val Bertoia, are intended to capture and distill energy, Bertoia’s monotypes look like sound waves or a rendering of the space-time continuum. His Sonambient sculptures appear to reach out to catch the surrounding invisible currents of air. While Bertoia also installed his sculptures in his barn, the sounds those sculptures make that contribute to a sense of awe. It is interesting to think about what is the spatial in art environments. Beyond the actual architecture, I think this might have to with ideas of atmosphere or, as the Germans call it, stimmung.

This is an incredible opportunity to experiment and to bring other elements into the discussion of art environments and an artist’s work. I’m a big fan of experimental curatorial practice, because the institution will often shy away from challenging dominant historical or biographical narratives about an artist with more poetic interpretations. I think the Arts Center did something quite phenomenal about what you do?

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