





Roundhouse: Pivotal Turntable Tactics

**Sheila Dickinson
Pete Driessen
Susan Smith-Grier**



**Three critical essays
on the occasion of the exhibition,
Pivotal Turntable Tactics/Pete Driessen,
in the Roundhouse Plaza & Boiler Shop at the
Northern Pacific Railway Yard, Brainerd, Minnesota,
October 2 – November 2, 2019.**



Roundhouse: Pivotal Turntable Tactics
Pete Driessen
Northern Pacific Rail Yard, Brainerd, MN USA
Opening Saturday, October 5, 5-8 pm

Blacksmith Circle: Roundhouse Wedge Installation
Boiler Shop/Process Space: Turntable Dock Installation
Sound Composition by Eric Anthony Frye
Critical Essay by Sheila Dickinson
Public Art Essay by Susan Smith-Grier
Dance by Sullivan & Co.

Related Activity:

Oct. 5:

Tiny School of Art & Design 2 – 5 pm at Roundhouse

Sullivan & Co. dance performance 7 pm at Turntable

After Party: Roundhouse Brewery 8-10 pm featuring Special Ltd. Ed. Turntable Ale

Oct. 12:

**Artist dialogue & tour with the artist, art critic/curator Sheila Dickinson,
 and writer/educator Susan Smith-Grier 3 pm**

Sullivan & Co. dance performance 4:30 pm

Shows Runs October 2 – November 2, 2019

Gallery Hours Wednesday - Sunday - 11-5 and By Appointment

at pete@petedriessen.com. Closed Monday & Tuesday.

1511 Northern Pacific Road, Brainerd, MN USA 56401

www.forecastpublicart.org www.npc1871.com

Image: Pete Driessen © 2019. Untitled (Roundhouse) Reworked digital image. Sourced from Crow Wing County Historical Society & Museum archives. Size varies with context. Courtesy the artist.

Pete Driessen is a fiscal year 2019 recipient of an Artist Initiative grant from the MN State Arts Board. This activity is funded in part by the MN State Legislature from the State's Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund with money from the vote of the very creative people of MN on November 4, 2008.

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44 Doors of the Roundhouse Turntable:

Roundhouse as Incubator
Roundhouse as Creativity
Roundhouse as Cultivation
Roundhouse as Ecosystem
Roundhouse as Home/Nest
Roundhouse as Community
Roundhouse as Bringing Forth
Roundhouse as Empowerment
Roundhouse as Rhizome/Roots
Roundhouse as Womb/Feminine/Mother/Rebirth

Roundhouse as Hub
Roundhouse as Dance
Roundhouse as Artist Studio
Roundhouse as Potters Wheel
Roundhouse as Social Structure
Roundhouse as Theatre in Round
Roundhouse as Recombinant Space
Roundhouse as Bootstrap/Building/Improve
Roundhouse as Spiral/Twist/Coiling/Corkscrew
Roundhouse as Political Structure (Progressive/Social/Revolution)

Roundhouse as Starfish
Roundhouse as Public Art
Roundhouse as Embodiment
Roundhouse as Curatorial Site
Roundhouse as Architectural Site
Roundhouse as Biology/Multiversa
Roundhouse as Ritual/Native Fire Dance
Roundhouse as Host/Autopoetic Structure
Roundhouse as Renewal/Sustainable/Healing Space
Roundhouse as Capitalist: Employment/Production/Distribution

Roundhouse as Octopus
Roundhouse as Pivot/Pivoting/Pivotal
Roundhouse as Web of Life/Spider Web
Roundhouse as Temporary Autonomous Zone
Roundhouse as Power/Force/Driver/Authority/Influencer
Roundhouse as Turntable/Rotator/Alternator/Transformer
Roundhouse as Center/Focal Point/Focus/Midpoint/ Interface
Roundhouse as Assembly/Gathering/Swarm/Congregation/Multitude
Roundhouse as Fastener/Repairing/Restoration/Renovator/Fixer/Mender
Roundhouse as Arranger/Composer/Director/Manager/Controller/Coordinator

Roundhouse as Axis/Aligner/Alliance/Alignments
Roundhouse as Heart/Mind/Brain/Spirit/Intelligence
Roundhouse as Worker/Laborer/Working Method/Handler
Roundhouse as Game of Life/Spin the Dial/Wheel of Chance/Fortune

From the Personal to the Collective: Driessen's Designs as Site-Specific Art

The Northern Pacific Railway Center (NP) filled with seemingly endless brick buildings, a little outside the old center of Brainerd, lies dormant mostly. Memory pulses through the many structures. The same ideology of American expansionism that built NP also turned it into an industrial ruin. Due to the effects of time, disuse and vacancy, the once thriving NP hub has become unfamiliar and strange to us today, otherworldly in its scale, built 150 years ago with rudimentary tools. What to do with this all this now? It has worn out its use both as a site of railroad labor and as a pivotal site in the ideological dream of American expansionism. Pete Driessen returns again to NP for another chance to create something out of its ruins. Like the turning disc in the old railroad roundhouse, he circles back to this place because something has been left undone, because there is too much potential, because there is a need for artistic and imaginative play to rebirth and create anew. Driessen offers artwork that mitigates the loss, that sutures the crevice between past, present and future.

What does it feel like to watch something fall into decline? To go from a healthy environment of hustle and bustle, a vibrant heart of a community into an empty, lifeless shell? A mourning lingers in the air, a haunting ether passes through the vacant buildings. It takes an artist's ability to tap into the historical depth of the context and hold closely the grief in order to find solace in the things that might happen in this space one day. Ruins are the place to retrench, to work from the ground up and build something that's entirely different, not new or old, but an emblematic fusion of yesterday and tomorrow. According to Svetlana Boym, contemporary ruinophilia, sees "the artist co-create with the remainders of history, collaborates with modern ruins, redefines their functions both utilitarian and poetic" (Boym, 36). What else can be here? Can the potential be realized? Driessen's turning of the roundhouse disc is a ritual turning a fugue, a wail that symbolically turns a thing from death to life.

Driessen's work taps into the root feeling that there is something still missing at this site. And his job as artist is not to tell us what that missing thing is, but to remind us that without considering context, history, identity, ancestors, that the new is but a shell. Because the "something" he temporarily creates, will also be removed, his "something" is therefore not the missing thing. Instead, Roundhouse and Turntable weave into the once purposefulness of the buildings, since art is by definition useless, just like most of the buildings, they then become the palette of the artist. The artwork's are, in fact, nothing without the backdrop of the immense layout of 150 year old brick buildings which came from Minnesota soil, clay for the bricks, wood for the beams and framework. But as we know, the buildings are so much more than a backdrop rather they are part and parcel within the artwork itself. Site-specific art is as much about geographical location or an architectural setting as it is about the discreet artwork placed within it (Kwon, 52) Without permanence and definitely without the travesty of modern public art that plops an intrusive sculpture from elsewhere, Roundhouse/ Pivotal Turntable Tactics is built from and for the commons.

Is it possible the previous railroad tycoons thought this idyllic Northern town, with industry as its foundation, was to be potentially a worker's utopia? Despite the grueling and dangerous physical labor, it was seen as a place to settle, grow a family and community connections. Is this what died here too, mixed with the musty smells in the dank abandoned rooms, the stench of lost utopias? Perhaps all the work done "in the name of utopia has soured its concept and left it strangled by internal, seemingly fixed perspectives, the skeletons of old efforts which leave their bones on the surface of the body as if they belonged there" Driessen does not so much resuscitate utopian dreams rather imagines reuse of a site beyond commercial and service industries, through something more abstract and poetic. Driessen builds up old skeletons, old rail ties surface and raise up with wings, pointing it seems to renewed hope that something entirely different will happen here.

In the ever present churning of wheels that propel us somewhere, always somewhere else, due to a societal impulse to move, Driessen works off the metaphor of movement inherent in transportation. This desire to move, to move people, to move natural resources, thereby built the structures, likewise, Driessen aims to capture the joy and power of movement inspired by transportation. *Trestle Workers*, 2017, at NP, unearthed the past lives of workers while his new work focuses on the movement of the trains, through the repair of the locomotive in the roundhouse, which cycled the trains back onto the tracks, and through the turning of the disc at the core of the roundhouse.

Nostalgia is the sentiment that lingers beside loss, a longing for something no longer here and now. The role of nostalgia can be a nod to “the good ol’ days” while also a collective “retrieval of rooted, place-bound identities” (Kwon, 164). But what if the nostalgia felt in this piece, is also connected to the past of the artists? Driessen’s focus on Brainerd and trains, can be as much about an artist looking back, tapping into his boyhood, as much as a desire to retrace a collective past. Driessen’s identity, if we call it out, white and male, is bound with a family cabin on a lake up North, and a boy’s love of trains and building things. Driessen’s return, his cycle back to his childhood, his focus in this new body of work at NP on the turntable, the roundhouse, the pivot around a single source, ascribes itself to an artist maturing, finding pleasure in past obsessions and sharing them with others. This personal nostalgia revealed in his art is ok, not fed by trenchant theory, but true to its source. Not as a universal given, but as an artist looking back at his life. He is bringing to Greater Minnesota a possibility to engage with contemporary art that is unusual in rural America (i.e., not a landscape painting) through his life time love of a place and trains while making an obsession, that of the ferroequinologist to be understood through the lens of contemporary art.

With vision and grit, Driessen has dedicated years to raising the funds, community support and literally raising his new wood structures themselves. With unbounded motivation he weaves in between the wood beams many levels of looking, from personal to collective, from past decline to future utopias. Thus he builds, takes down and builds another a gift that comes to us as it turns along the distribution line, asking the viewer to sit with the strange, otherworldly place without requiring it to be useful.

Works Cited

Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. MIT Press, 2002.
Boym, Svetlana. *Architecture of the Off-Modern*. Princeton Architectural Press, 2008.

Sheila Dickinson Curator, Art Critic, Art Historian

Dr. Sheila Dickinson is currently the Artistic Director at the Rochester Art Center where she has led collaborations with the Mayo Clinic on exhibitions that bridge art and health. She is also an art critic and curator, who has published in *Artforum*, *ART News*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Hyperallergic*, *InReview*, *Hong Kong’s Artomity*, among others and curated *Alexa Horochowski: Beautiful Sky* and *Eamon O’Kane: Intimate Expansive*. She was accepted into the Andy Warhol Foundation/AICA USA Art Writer’s Workshop where she worked with a mentor at the *Wall Street Journal*. She previously taught modern art history and visual culture for over ten years, most recently as Visiting Assistant Professor at Macalester College. Her PhD from University College Dublin, Ireland focused on contemporary Irish art.



The Roundhouse Convergence of Time and Space

Pivotal Turntable Tactics by Pete Driessen pulls together the past and the present and touches the future with imagination, sound, and visual effects swirling in a sense of community. In this space, the innovation of the first roundhouse created to service and maintain railroad steam engines, echoes through Driessen's monumental works, Roundhouse Wedge and Turntable Dock.

Looking Back

Visitors to the Northern Pacific Center are not always aware of the history that surrounds them. The giant circular form in the center of the grounds does not easily give up its story on casual observation. Whereas, the buildings surrounding the area seem to hold the vibrations of the past.

Touch the brick and hear the voices of the railroad workers calling to one another, shouting instructions, laughing, grousing, sharing stories of family, women and days gone by. Close your eyes and smell oakwood soaked in creosote oil, engine oil dripping from gears, coal burning in the blacksmith's shop, sweaty men exhausted from long hours of working.

Sit on the sill of the concrete circle in the center of this space. Open air now, but close your eyes and listen to the sound of the steam engine pulling into the roundhouse. Hear the gears clanging and screeching as the lumbering engine is slowly turned around. Marvel at the wonder of engineering that created these machines, not just the steam engine, but the mechanism to turn this engine around.

Now

The railroad virtually created Brainerd. Without the Northern Pacific Railroad, this city would not be what it is today. Driessen's installation reminds us of the hours spent on hard work as community members pulled together to create something that would benefit everyone. His vision of the wonder of the roundhouse engages the community both in the building process itself, and also in the sharing of the final work.

In many ways it may seem as though the sense of community, people working together to achieve something, has gone by the wayside as of late. Yet, the Roundhouse Wedge and Turntable Docking Installations say otherwise. As art pieces, one man's vision has touched many.

This space informed Driessen's vision. It is a space that's called him since childhood. He answered that call and has honored the past by bringing to the forefront a replica of what was once new in this space nearly 150 years ago.

Today, thanks to Driessen and those who worked with him to create what we see here, we get to step back and reflect on the lives spent in this place. Those hardworking men constructed a marvel of technology for that time. We get to reflect on what it meant to work as a crew on the railroad. We get to reflect on the quality of relationships then and now. We get to reflect on our own values of working with others. We get to ponder our own sense of creativity.

Into the Future

Creativity is a vital component of our culture. The artist who shares publicly the vision that inspires and ignites the imagination is a valuable asset to our society. The artist as visionary can remind us of what was by creating art that echoes the past while at the same time inspiring others to tap into their own creativity to become catalysts for the future. Through endeavors of inspired creativity, the culture moves forward.

It was creativity and imagination that allowed for the construction of the steam engine, the railroad system and the amazing roundhouse. We still have trains. There are still some creosote soaked oakwood railroad ties out there, but steam engines, roundhouses, and the men who built them are gone now. The future is streamlined, lightning fast, and . . . what? Will it be as creative as it was 150 years ago? Perhaps, with inspiration by creative minds like Driessen, it will.

Susan Smith-Grier, Writer & Educator

Sue Smith-Grier is a writer, copywriter, and award-winning poet. She has contributed to several magazines and websites over the years including three regional magazines, Lake Country Journal, Her Voice, and Lakes Area Living. Her work also appears in Blues Vision, an anthology of African American Minnesotan writers of note. Smith-Grier is adept at research, writing hundreds of articles and stories on a wide variety of subjects. In addition to her writing skills, she is also known for her work as a storyteller and songwriter. She delights in the power of words and story and believes peace on earth is possible if we really listen to each other's stories. Susan has two adult children of whom she is very proud and an exceptionally wonderful grandson about whom she cannot say enough good things.



NP Roundhouse Plaza/Blacksmith Circle Site:

1. Roundhouse Wedge

2019

Rough Sawn Red & White Pine, Metal Hardware: Simpson Strong Ties & Hex Screws, Lag screws, Eyelets, Wire, Washers, Turnbuckles, Quick Clips, Brackets, Duct Tape, Stakes.

Wedge Base: Appx. 24 ft (H) x 22 ft (W) x 40 ft (L)

Wedge Base with Wings: Appx. 32 ft (H) x 24 ft (W) x 46 ft (L)

Wedge Tunnel Height: 8 ft.

Width of RR Tracks (Grass): 5 ft.

NP Boiler Shop/Process Space:

1. TurnTable Dock Installation:

2019

Rough Sawn Red & White Pine, Metal Hardware: Simpson Strong Ties & Hex Screws, Lag Screws, Eyelets, Wire, Washers, Turnbuckles, Quick Clips, Brackets, Welded Pivot, Aluminum Poles, Dock Hardware, Piping Caps, Duct Tape, Casters.

Turntable Base: Appx. 13 ft (H) x 8 ft (W) x 22 ft (L)

Turntable With Wings & Arms: Appx. 21 ft (H) x 8.5 ft (W) x 28 ft (L)

Width of track: 5 ft.

NP Boiler Shop/Entry:

1. Untitled Roundhouse Pattern - (Various Wall Alignments)

2019

36x36 inches wide by various lengths.

Ink on Engineer paper.

Unsigned Limited Ed. Roll of 50 ft.

2. Research Media - (Shelf)

2019

Size & Materials vary during duration of exhibit.

Assorted components found on site and/or during research and residency.

NP Boiler Shop/Office:

3. Untitled Roundhouse Side View (Framed)

2019

20x24 inches.

Sharpee marker on Vellum

4. **Untitled Roundhouse Front View (Framed)**

2019

20x24 inches.

Sharpee marker on Vellum

5. **Untitled Roundhouse Wiring View (Framed)**

2019

20x24 inches.

Sharpee marker on Vellum

6. **Untitled Roundhouse Drawings**

2019

Sizes vary

Oil Stick, oil pastel, pencil, graphite, pen, or marker on black, office, graph, and tissue papers

Various field notes, sketches, drawings, ephemera created during research and/or residency.

7. **Pivotal Turntable Tactics Poster– (Framed)**

2019

24x36 inches.

Ink on Engineer paper

Signed Artist Proof #1/1 from Limited Ed. Print of 50.

Signed/dated by the artist in Thin Black Sharpee Marker. Collection of the artist

8. **Untitled Turntable Pattern - (Various Wall Alignments)**

2019

36x38 inches.

Ink on Engineer paper.

Unsigned Limited Ed. Roll of 50 ft.

9. **Untitled Roundhouse Model – Various - (Desk Tables)**

2019

Size Varies.

Pine Wood/Balsa Wood/Colored Craft Sticks/Coffee Sticks/Wood Glue/Tape

Works from research and created for design of final sculptures.

