

Cabinet



HARRY SMITH: STRING FIGURES

Organized by Terry Winters

19 September – 3 November 2012

“Harry Smith: String Figures,” an exhibition drawn from the collection of John Cohen and organized by painter Terry Winters, features twenty-two string figures created by Smith (1923–1991), the legendary artist, filmmaker, and ethnomusicologist.

Though perhaps best known to the general public for his groundbreaking research into early twentieth-century American folk music—and the seminal six-album compilation he produced for the Smithsonian Institution in 1952—Smith was also active as an artist and filmmaker in both San Francisco and New York, where he lived from the early 1950s until his death.

A widely curious polymath, Smith was an avid collector of artifacts ranging from Seminole textiles to Ukrainian Easter eggs; he also amassed the world’s largest known collection of paper airplanes, which he later donated to the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum. He also was an avid student of string figures. First described in Western anthropological literature by Franz Boas in 1888, these patterns—made by looping or weaving lengths of string into geometric forms or shapes that often evoke familiar objects—have been produced throughout history, both as a secular pastime and as a spiritual practice. When he died, Smith left an unfinished thousand-page manuscript on string figures, along with an extensive collection of figures that he had created. Cabinet’s exhibition brings together a selection of these artifacts, along with a facsimile of portions of Smith’s unpublished manuscript and an accompanying video program.

Also on view will be a limited edition print *Strings (for Cabinet)* by Terry Winters published on the occasion of the exhibition. Proceeds from sales of the edition will support Cabinet’s activities.

VIDEO PROGRAM

1. Harry Smith “Early Abstractions” (1946–1957); 22 minutes.

No. 1: A Strange Dream (1946).

No. 2: Message from the Sun (1946–1948).

No. 3: Interwoven (1947–1949) (Part 1).

No. 3: Interwoven (1947–1949) (excerpt).

No. 4: Fast Track (1947).

No. 5: Circular Tensions, Homage to Oskar Fischinger (1950).

No. 7: Color Study (1952).

No. 10: Mirror Animations (1957).

2. Harry Smith, *Heaven and Earth Magic* (ca. 1957–1962); 67 minutes.

3. 1991 Grammy Awards, Chairman’s Merit Award to Harry Smith “Harry Smith Acknowledged” (1991); 2 minutes.

4. Drew Christie, John Cohen “Some Crazy Magic: Meeting Harry Smith” (2011); 4 minutes.

5. Drew Christie, John Cohen, “American Standard Time Presents: John Cohen” (2011); 10 minutes.

6. John Cohen, “High Lonesome Sound” (Excerpt—Roscoe Holcomb Porch Banjo) (1963); 2 minutes.

7. The Dust Busters with John Cohen, “My Name is John Johanna” (Live on KEXP) (2011); 4 minutes.

8. Alexander Fryer, “Jacob’s Ladder String Figure” (2008); 3 minutes.

9. Daybreakwarrior, “Navajo String Games by Grandma Margaret” (2008); 6 minutes.

RELATED PROGRAMS

“Patchworks and String Bands”

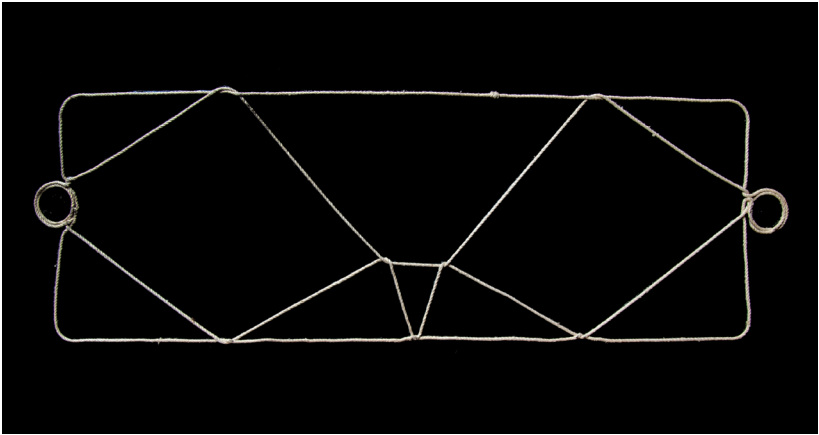
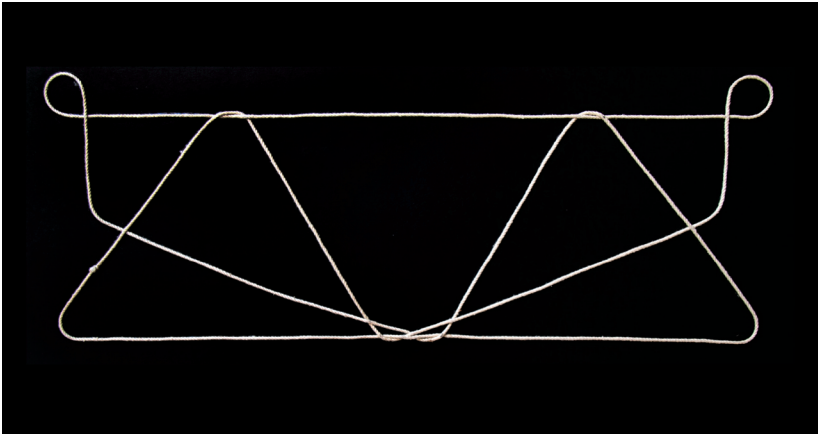
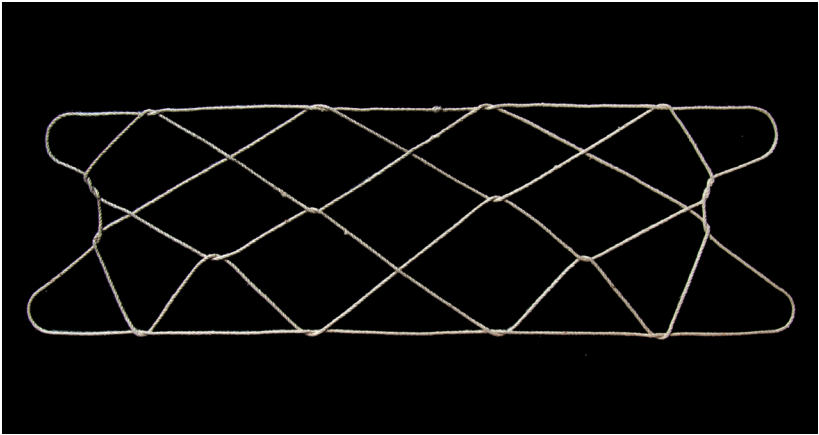
Thursday, 11 October 2012, 7 pm

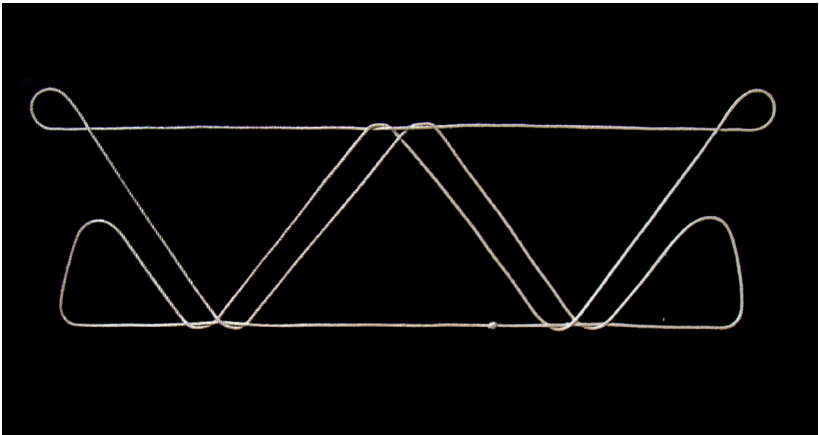
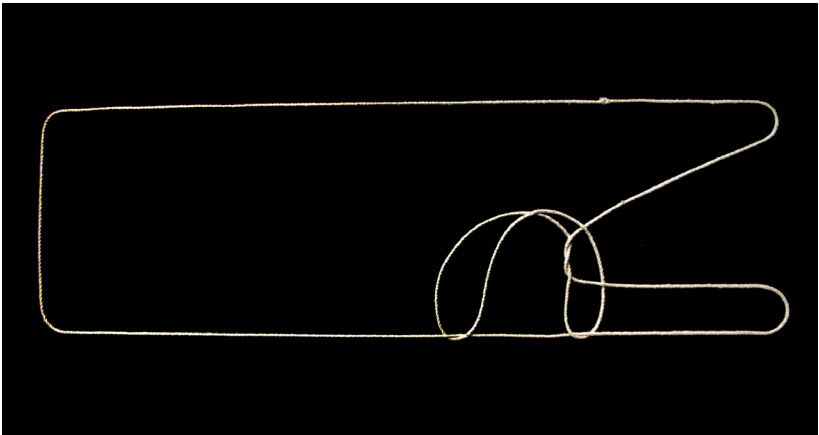
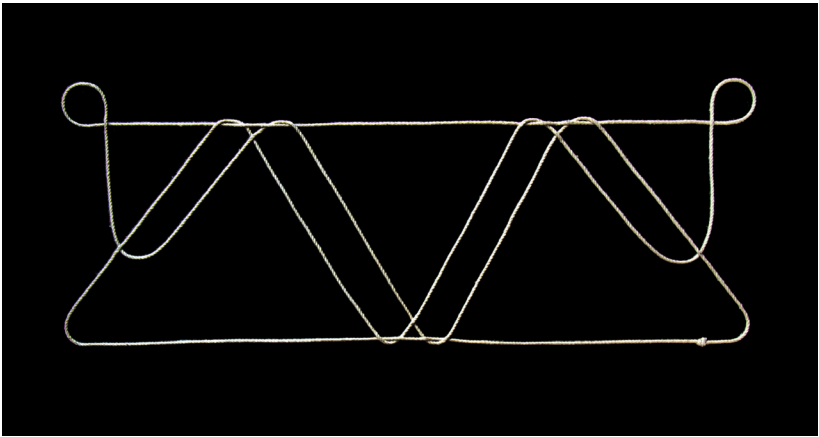
A program of film and live music by John Cohen and the Downhill Strugglers. Two short documentaries about banjo player Tommy Jarrell and quilter Mary Jane Holcomb will be followed by a workshop exploring the connecting patterns of ballads, social music, and songs.

“Knots and Unknots”

Thursday, 25 October 2012, 7 pm

A presentation by mathematician Philip Ording on string figures, knot theory, and pictorial topology, followed by discussion between Ording and Terry Winters.





EXCERPT FROM “A RARE INTERVIEW WITH HARRY SMITH”

Interview by John Cohen

John Cohen: An involvement of yours which we haven't yet discussed is the string games.

Harry Smith: Every few years I get interested in string games, but I don't have all the apparatus for doing it.

JC: Don't you just need a piece of string?

HS: No, no. You need the instructions. I'm writing a book on the subject. Thousands of pages of it are written, but it has to have the references corrected, et cetera.

JC: What is it that you saw in the strings?

HS: Oh, it was some universal thing that seemed to be more widely distributed than anything else in places that didn't have so-called “civilization.” It was the only thing that I could isolate off-hand that was produced by all primitive societies and by no “cultured” societies. For example, string figures are found everywhere in the world except Europe and Asia, except for a few peripheral areas like the hills in the Philippines and Scotland. None of these places like France, Russia, Japan, China, Turkey have string figures, despite a great interest in games. It is a bit difficult to understand how the same thing is done in Patagonia as is done within the Arctic Circle or the Kalahari Desert without leaving some evidence in Europe and Asia. I've had various theories for that. Possibly it has to do with the parts of the brain that memorize letters (which usually seem to be around thirty or fifty—the things you have to learn to write a language), because string figures don't occur in a place where writing is done. It's a way of tying together a lot of diffuse areas. Unfortunately, there aren't that many good collections. There may be pictures printed, but you have to have the instructions as well.

JC: What do you see in a figure?

HS: It depends on where it's from. Some places make realistic figures. Like the Eskimos make complicated, realistic, asymmetrical figures, whereas most of Micronesia and the Australian

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 Key to Symbols used

L = Toe
 Y = loop
 s or s's = string (s)
 L = Left
 R = Right
 B = Both
 H = hand (s)
 p = proximal
 d = distal
 U = Ulnar
 R = Radial
 P = palmar
 D = Dorsal
 Δ = triangle
 T = Thumb
 I = index finger
 M = middle finger
 O = ring finger
 L = little finger
 F = finger
 f's = fingers
 Wr. = wrist
 Rel. = Release
 Ret. = Return
 Ex = Extension
 Pindiki Moment
 Navaho Movement
 Op = opening
 M = Mouth
~~Xi~~

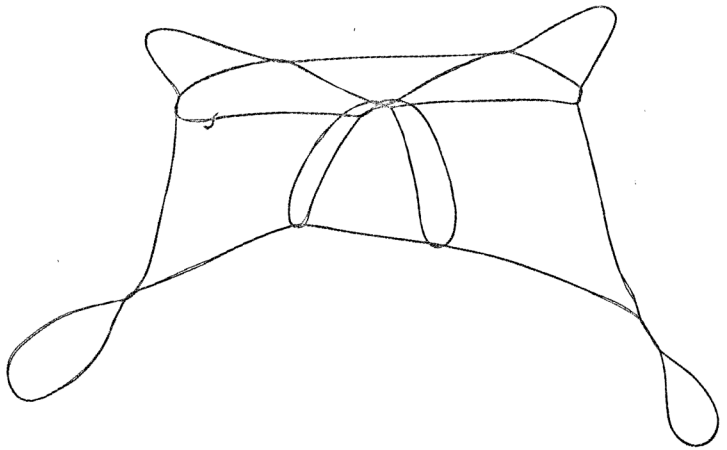
figures would be geometrical and are consequently named after flowers and stars and things. The techniques developed in these pieces are suitable for such geometric figures, while those of the Eskimos are for realistic animals, birds, and people.

JC: I remember that some of the Eskimo strings act out little dramas, like a house falling down and the man running away.

HS: That occurs everywhere. The reason that there is a lot of drama in the ones from the Eskimos is that it was a carefully made collection. Anywhere that a careful collection is made—which would take a number of years to do in any place—there would always be moving figures. The other oddity is that the string is always the same length, no matter where it is, and that only one person does the string figures. Something similar to the string figure, but not in any way connected, is the cat's cradle, which is done all over Europe and Asia. The cat's cradle is a game, while the string figures are essentially pictures of something. They do have many other uses in the cultures concerned. My interest in them was merely as something that a lot of people did who are usually lumped together as being primitive. The distribution of anything else isn't the same—the bow and arrow, pottery, basketry, or clothing—any kind of conceptions. As far as I know, the string figures are the only universal thing other than singing. But singing may exist universally for the same reason: that a lot of experiences are lumped together as songs which probably aren't. Like tonal languages, as in Yoruba, lots of things that were identified as songs turned out to be poetry that is at a certain pitch. Or a Seneca book I have here, which is spoken, but because it's transcribed from a tape recorder, it is possible to indicate what tone each word is sounded on. Because of this possibility of transcriptions from tape recordings it becomes very difficult to determine where speech ended and singing began. It is an artifact of the technical productions of people's vocal chords that classifies certain things as songs, and it may be the same way with string figures. They may have derived from many different sources.

Excerpted from Sing Out!, vol. 19, no. 1 (1969), pp. 2–11, 41; no. 2 (1969), pp. 22–28.

(ENTRANCE TO) THE IGLOO



Page from Smith's unfinished manuscript on string figures.
Courtesy Harry Smith Archives.

STRING FIGURES: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN JOHN COHEN AND TERRY WINTERS

Terry Winters: You received the string figures as a gift—is that right?

John Cohen: Yes. I went to visit Harry and there was a paper bag with all this material, and he said, “Hey you want these, John?” I thought he gave them to me out of frustration. Maybe he realized he would never get around to the project. To me, the idea that they’re set up on black with white suggests something like animation, but I don’t know how you would animate these. Maybe he realized that also. I think that if you want to animate these figures, you have to show how the fingers move. The piece of cord or string would just start out as a loop, and then you start subdividing it and putting your fingers through to make patterns—that would be interesting to see, but how could he show that?

TW: Maybe that’s his interest, the virtual animations behind each figure. That would connect to his involvement with abstract painting and moviemaking.

JC: These pieces aren’t works of art, or maybe they are—but they are unique objects.

TW: They have an atmosphere or an aura, as well as an order.

JC: I think Harry was very much about that aura. He tried to put his aura on everything that he touched. In other words, it wasn’t enough that the material existed—until he designated an order, they were just facts. He had a huge collection of paper airplanes from schoolyards in New York, and he was setting up a system to analyze them, to give them another meaning.

Many books already exist about string figures, and there are people who know how to make them, and yet those things don’t strike me like these objects. It comes around to the fact that Harry focused on it. What it meant to him becomes just as important as the thing. I don’t know which books he was referencing but his approach is similar to the Folkways Anthology records—those records were available everywhere, but the way

Harry put them together generates something bigger than the recordings themselves.

Harry was a collector. He made collections of things. He had collections of paper airplanes, collections of these string figures, collections of patchwork quilts... So he produced a discography. He was getting these recordings from record collectors and trading them. He was always looking for the best version.

And Harry was also just a wise guy. He would do playful things or just make things that struck his imagination or that he thought would bamboozle the experts or put down the academics or show that he knew more or... It was never just a straight fact with Harry.

But I don't think he was that systematic. Harry just looked at these things and said, "This is wild!" or "This is wonderful," or "It's a freak-out," or "Psychedelic." But when you try to reduce it to that, he would come back with something that seemed very logical and scholarly. I asked him, "How do you keep up with all these different disciplines—the latest in anthropology or this or that theory?" And he says, "I go to the bookstore up at Columbia University at the beginning of the term to see what the graduate students are asked to read." Because their professors are probably the most advanced. That's his reading list! I don't know if it was true, but it was a wonderful story. Another memory of Harry: One time I was with him at the Chelsea, and he said, "I gotta get some music for some guy in Philadelphia." I said, "Well, how are you going to get this music?" He said, "Oh, there's a record store that has music from all around, real specialized stuff." Maybe he was looking for Polynesian or Melanesian panpipe music. I remember it was something pretty obscure. I wondered, "Where is he gonna go?" He hails a taxi—and of course I'm paying for it—and we go right up to Times Square! Right in the middle of Times Square there's a gigantic record store, and in the back they have all the UNESCO discs. He knew that. But you have to go right through Times Square and all the flashy stuff to get to this obscure source. So that's where he did his research, Columbia University and Times Square!

But let's go back to the string figures themselves. There are certain limitations that you accept, like a continuous piece of string

and ten fingers on two hands.

And then what you can do within that is fascinating. I'm leaping around, but I listen to a lot of American fiddle tunes. And there's a lot of them, thousands. The musicians don't play from a book, they just make patterns. The same with people who make quilts. Some of them are standard things, and some of them they just invent and put together. Well, that desire to make patterns, and the endless variations on something within a limitation, is really interesting. I find that to be the unifying quality, for fiddle tunes and crocheting and quilts. And maybe string figures, too.

15 June 2012

Putnam Valley, New York

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

John Cohen is a photographer, filmmaker, and draftsman, as well as a musician and founding member of the New Lost City Ramblers. He is also known for his early research on and collection of Andean textiles.

Philip Ording is assistant professor of mathematics at CUNY's Medgar Evers College. He received his PhD in 2006 from Columbia University. This summer, he and Helena Kauppila co-curated "Model Theories," an exhibition at Ford Project, New York, exploring the capacity of artworks to function as models.

Terry Winters is a painter based in New York. His most recent exhibition, "Cricket Music, Tessellation Figures & Notebook," was held this year at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York.

ABOUT CABINET

Featuring exhibitions of both contemporary art and historical materials, as well as an eclectic schedule of talks and screenings, Cabinet's space was inaugurated in the fall of 2008 to extend the magazine's engagement with art and culture into the public realm. The venue is open Wednesday to Saturday (except October 6, 10, and 11) from 12 to 6 pm, and is wheelchair-accessible. For more information, contact Cabinet at press@cabinetmagazine.org.

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