

The Power of a Country Road

Danila Cahen from the De Appel Curatorial Program interviews Jenny Perlin. Perlin exhibited the films Schumann and Washing in the exhibition "Quicksand," at De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, April 2-May 23, 2004

"The power of a country road is different when one is walking along it from when one is flying over it by airplane. In the same way, the power of a text is different when it is read from when it is copied out."

--Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*

DC:

After reading Walter Benjamin's 1928 book, *One-Way Street*, you kept this quote crumpled up in your wallet for some time and started copying trash, cash register receipts and other seemingly insignificant scraps. Could you elaborate on why this book was so important for you, how Benjamin's writing is related to your work and what the act of copying does for you?

JP:

Walter Benjamin's writings have been extremely meaningful to me for a long time now. He was able to unpack cultural and political significance from objects, texts, and experiences that appear at first to be completely banal. I have been influenced by so much of his writing, but most of all by *One Way Street*; its brief, anecdotal forms, charged political conclusions drawn from the most banal details, interspersed with personal visions and romantic observations.

Copying for me is a strange and dual process. I think all filmmaking is a kind of copying. I started hand drawing printed materials and detritus in 1999 and began to bring the process into my films. Since I started as a filmmaker, it seemed like the most logical place to combine these things. As for what I'm copying, in a way, it's a literal use of the Benjamin text. I'm going deeper into the junk of everyday life, the overlooked stuff we throw away, to unpack its politics, its specificity and humanity. I hope that through the combination of materials, you can enter communication with the world in a slightly different way. I want to get people thinking: who is the checkout person at this register? Why do we believe a Rorschach test more than a fortune cookie fortune? What is the assault on a lived experience when you have to fill out an impersonal form about why you are seeking political asylum? How does music 'sound' when it is copied out?

DC:

In most of the animation films you combine different languages, codes, text and drawings varying from manuals on how to grow trees, internet sites on self help (how to become a better person), side effects of anti-depressives like Prozac, and letterings of cash transactions. Could you tell something more on why you use these specific texts and drawings?

JP:

In each of these films, I'm trying to reduce film to its most basic elements. Instead of creating a story with dialogue, mood with lighting and action with editing, I'm presenting simple panels with roughly drawn texts or drawings, one after another. The viewer hopefully connects one with the next, in a simple, additive process. As for why I use the specific texts, each film has its own sources I work from. I'm interested in trying to make visible things that we take for granted, and in combining them, to create new meaning.

DC:

You use a very extensive manually and old fashioned working method. You draw one letter, film two frames, draw one letter, film two frames. The images come to life like typewritten letters, in a staccato rhythm. You see the direct process of filmmaking. The imperfections, momentary breakdowns and dirtiness of the film footage are always present in the work. It seems to be something that you intentionally play with, both in the making of the work as in the presentation of it. How important is this medium for you? What is so attractive about 16 mm film?

JP:

Though I work in an infinitely reproducible, mechanical medium, I like to see the mark of the hand, the scratches that come from the materiality of plastic and emulsion. There is always a lot of distance with film, and a lot of glamour associated with it as a medium. By the handmade quality of the films and by projecting the films relatively small (as opposed to the monumentality of theatrical projection) I hope to reduce that. I want the viewer to be able to come close

to the film, to scrutinize it and climb inside it. Since the content of the films frequently makes reference to late 19th and early 20th century ideas, a 19th century medium like film seems necessary to the process. 16mm is very important to me, especially since it is fading into obscurity and is being superseded by digital technologies. This inevitably gives the work a historical dimension. However, the references to 'antique' formats are thrown into contrast with the presence of so many contemporary references (Wal-Mart, Kmart, Prozac, INS, etc) in the content of the films. I enjoy creating this back and forth between past and present in the work.

DC:

In the film *Rorschach* you combine four things: questions from an INS questionnaire form, drawings from the psychological Rorschach test, cliché texts from fortune cookies and cash register receipts from things you purchased in the months immediately after September 11. Could you elaborate on what this work is about for you?

JP:

In July of 2001, I had been in Serbia and Kosovo, where I had seen the destruction of that war and of the NATO bombing, firsthand. It was the first time I had seen bombed buildings in my life. The second time I witnessed such destruction was on September 11, 2001. I live in Brooklyn and was not physically harmed by the attacks, but walked to the Brooklyn Bridge that morning. Across the waters walked ghostly figures of businessmen and women coated in dust. Burned pieces of office memos and paper were flying over the river like lost birds. I picked some up but then let them go. After that time, spontaneous memorials began, every evening in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Simultaneously, the banality of life went on. Groceries bought, coffee with friends (more than ever, in fact), receipts collected. It was so hard to reconcile the lived experience with the loss. In a way, it was an exile from a kind of fantasy of what the U.S. was supposed to be, invulnerable, universally loved (hard to believe now).

Rorschach (to me) contains some of all of the above. Deportations have skyrocketed since September 11, and continue to silently destroy communities throughout the U.S. I thought of refugees, the arbitrariness of how their lives change forever, and of things, which have or can have a permanent influence on peoples' lives. If you score badly on the Rorschach test you can have mental health assessments that determine how your life moves forward from that point on. Fortune cookies are funny, but I also imagine that if you are ready to take an action, and are looking for a sign of any sort, a fortune cookie might be the very thing that propels you into doing something. The other documents are forms published by the INS (now the Department of Homeland Security) on how to apply for political asylum in the US and how to keep from being deported. I also included a section in the film of my daily receipts from after September 11, 2001. This banality heightened the tension, for me, of the changes that were happening after those evenings. In combining these elements, I wanted in a way to create a portrait of a situation in which someone was going through these proceedings.

DC:

In the film *Schumann*, you combine drawings of a musical piece by the composer Schumann (you see the notes coming to life without hearing any sound), quotes in German, images of knots, of trees cut in a certain way, lists of phobias and quotes from self-help websites. For me the work is about fear and the need for control in the U.S. Could you tell me something more about this work?

JP:

The film originally started as a project to talk about trauma and recovery. I had been very afraid of crossing bridges, my studio looked out over the Brooklyn Bridge, and my original idea was to force myself to walk over the Brooklyn Bridge every day and interview people about the changed perception of the Manhattan skyline, and about their fears and phobias. I started doing this and realized that when I organized the walking over the bridge as part of a project, my fear evaporated. I began working on *Schumann*. I wanted to use the musical score as a structuring element in the film. Schumann himself was tormented by mental illness and nervous breakdowns. I combined quotes from the composer, and his incredibly exciting score, with images of the Brooklyn Bridge (source of trauma), knots (traumas) and lists of phobias, some of which are very specific and even poetic. The first half of the film takes a phobic, paranoid trajectory, whereas in the second half, elements from contemporary self-help texts begin to appear, the music changes to a Tutti (all), and a different time signature (3/4) to indicate some change of tempo. In the second half, images of trees being pruned or trained appear, alluding to a kind of homogenization of experience, which to me relates to the kinds of commodified self-help strategies which are very prevalent in the US. At the very end of the film, I turned the camera to a live-action scene of the view from my studio. The scarred landscape of lower Manhattan and the everyday sight of the Brooklyn Bridge stand as markers of the time and place of making the film, and make reference back to the

sources of the film itself.

DC:

The exhibition *Quicksand* relates to the idea of a basis, an underground, which seems solid but can give in as soon as you stand on it, an existential feeling of insecurity and instability relating to this time and age. Can you relate to this?

JP:

In quicksand one is sucked underneath by a surface that you originally think of as stable. Film is a seductive medium, the whirr or purr of the projector, the illusion of reality, and in the theatrical space the soothing dark room and the screen that plays out your dreams in front of you. In using film, I'm already trying to seduce the viewer into stepping onto the quicksand and getting slowly pulled in. But pulled into what? I want to induce a moment of recognition of 'that's me, too' or 'I do this,' or 'I believe that,' or 'I shopped there,' and then to hope the viewer looks deeper, and will continue to look, both inward and outward, after leaving the space of the film. I think one of the greatest things about making art is the play between de-familiarizing something and letting something be utterly familiar. I'm interested in pointing at phenomena in the world, the overlooked junk of the everyday, or of history, so that we can then point to ourselves.

Many people are still laboring under the misunderstanding that art can't have social or political effects, but it really can. Work that is challenging, that works with and against the language of the culture and of the medium, work which is honest and struggles to speak, to take risks, and to be connected to people this is good work, in my view, whether it is a painting, a video, or an activist website. I think art must always and does always reflect on the world around them. The question is, is it reflecting it critically and thoughtfully, or is it reflecting it thoughtlessly, without any desire to unpack or question the things we take for granted.