

POSSIBLE MODELS: NEW WORK BY JENNY PERLIN

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“The sound of gunfire, off in the distance,
I'm getting used to it now”

-- from “Life during Wartime” by David Byrne

Brooklyn artist Jenny Perlin creates films, videos, and texts that respond to the climate and implications of war and its aftermath, history and how we choose to act in the world. In *Possible Models*, her first major solo museum exhibition, Perlin is looking closely at the complexities of current politics and the impact these politics have on the rest of the world. She has created a body of work that is imbued with a sense of trauma, mourning, memory, repetition, survival, and the act of continuing life during war time. Simply put, it is work that asks “How do we maintain our everyday lives while the atrocities of war continue?”

The films and videos *Sight Reading*, *Possible Models*, *Washing*, and the installation *Translation* conceptually and subtly examine politics and the post-9/11 world, the reverberations that occur after the initial trauma has taken place. Through these pieces, Perlin is not suggesting a new *political* model, but instead a new *artistic* model, one that uses the devices of film, video, editing, and text to study the commonplace and extend it into a larger political context, creating an elegant and powerful meditation on what it means to be living in 21st century America.

The act of performance and the role of editing as a distancing tool are important components in Perlin's large-scale work *Sight Reading* (2004). In this three-channel video, Perlin uses the editing process to highlight the act of failure and relate this failure to instances of trauma. To create the video, Perlin invited three classically-trained pianists to perform a difficult piece they had never seen before: Robert Schumann's 1841 piano concerto in A minor. Each pianist is shown in separate projections yet all sit in the same room at the same piano and each starts the piece simultaneously. The performers continue to play at their natural speed. After a mistake, the pianist's screen goes dark for five seconds, and their music stops, while the other pianists continue uninterrupted. The projection then resumes, and the pianist continues the piece. As the music becomes more difficult, the more mistakes the players make, and, consequently, the more often the three projections turn off. What started off as a major work of music unravels into a cacophony of sounds and failures.

Sight Reading playfully contemplates the attempt to recite a work for the first time. Due to its grueling demand of training, music is an apt channel for this type of exercise. The editing acts as the fourth “musician” in the work, mimicking through sound the jump-cuts of a camera. Perlin is interested in the “myth” of Schumann, a composer who suffered from anxiety and self-doubt his entire life and eventually spent his last days in an asylum. In *Sight Reading*, Perlin employs the the composer in reflecting on the anxiety of performance and the act of survival—the trauma of failure and how we choose to continue after disaster takes place: the screen turns black and then we continue.

The stop-animation as displayed in Perlin's 2004 film *Possible Models* conjures up references to William Kentridge, the acclaimed South African artist who often animates his political and controversial charcoal drawings. For Perlin, however, the critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin is perhaps a more direct inspiration. "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." Perlin carried this Benjamin quote from his 1928 book *One Way Street* in her wallet for several months. She soon began to copy out trash, receipts, and other random items found in her purse and created animated films out of them. This act of reproduction became, like a type of mantra, an exercise in learning how the most mundane text performs, what it means, and how it translates. "Copying for me is a strange and dual process," Perlin explains. "I think all filmmaking is a kind of copying."

In *Possible Models* Perlin extends the re-iteration of text in creating a politically charged work that interweaves the story of the first shopping mall ever built, the failure of the Mall of America as a consumer utopia, the mall of Dubai as the new super-mall, and finally the "Freedom Ship," the first mobile floating city that ceaselessly circles the continents and includes a state-of-the-art mall. The descriptions of these consumer palaces are held together by a larger story: a 2004 newspaper report of a Somali man charged with plotting to blow up an Ohio mall.

The report links the Somali man to an al-Qaeda cell, thus turning the shopping mall into a complicated symbol, not only of wealth, but of the injustices global capital can incur. The Somali man in *Possible Models* represents a larger population—those who do not have the privileges of citizenship or limitless capital.

In the days following 9/11, then New York mayor, Rudolph Guliani encouraged the "best shoppers in the world" to go out and support the economy as an act of patriotism. *Possible Models*, perhaps Perlin's most difficult work to date, points to the inherent politics in this American pastime. As well, the subtext of the story on the Somali man has deeper political roots. John Ashcroft announced the supposed terrorist plan in 2004, the day before John Kerry came to campaign in the important swing-state Ohio, eliminating Kerry from the front pages of the newspapers.

The multi-layered stop-animation in *Possible Models* works in a simple additive process, each frame containing text building on the next. The viewer is held within the frame, caught between reading the text and following the multiple threads of the narrative. This time distancing does not occur so much through the use of editing, but through the act of copying. Due to Perlin's laborious reproduction of stories through written text, the viewer is one step removed from all the mall sites as well as the personal story of the accused Somali. After all, we never see his picture and only know that his name is Nuradin Abdi; the content is reduced to the bare details of a news story, interpreted through Perlin's careful lettering.

Perlin directly responds to the events of September 11th in the minimal yet incredibly affecting 2002 film *Washing*. The 16mm, ten second looped film depicts the seemingly simple image of a hand washing a window. However, on closer inspection we can see that the window looks out onto lower Manhattan and the empty space in the skyline where the towers of the World Trade Center once stood. Perlin made this piece during her residency at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, an institution that normally housed artists' studios in the upper levels of the World Trade Center. After 9/11 the LMCC moved its studios temporarily to a site in Brooklyn, a site that overlooked the East River. Perlin's studio had a direct view onto the newly scarred Manhattan skyline. In *Washing* what starts as a redemptive gesture, however,

gives way to impossibility. As the film is looped through the projector, the image becomes dirtier and dirtier, as if to suggest the futility in trying to cleanse a nation of a collective memory, a collective trauma.

Translation (2005), exhibited here for the first time, is an installation that directly investigates the distance between experience and memory. It is comprised of a series of audio recordings Perlin made in 2003 in Europe and Brooklyn alongside some 50 drawings, and several short texts. Perlin recorded everyday sounds she encountered while traveling as a way of remembering a place, rather than taking pictures. Three months after her return to the United States she attempted to describe accurately every site where she recorded. She mailed to her friends and colleagues each a different description. She then asked them to create a drawing based on her translated audio-memory. When exhibited together, the audio, descriptions, and drawings all combine to create a multi-layered memory, one that is part Perlin's and part the people she has chosen to collaborate with. Perlin sees the act of translating as actually inventing a new language: "This is, in a sense, allowing lots of other people to create my language of memory, or to participate in my experience at two levels of remove." Perlin's memory becomes a node in which others' personal recollections and understanding of the world are intermingled, thus suggesting the slippery truth inherent to all personal memory.

In this exhibition, Jenny Perlin invites viewers to extend and rely on their own experience and memory when viewing her work. In each piece she looks at the small mundane parts of life—washing a window, shopping at the local mall, playing the piano—and spins the quotidian into the political. Through the use of film and memory, Perlin makes us look at the present that much closer and ask during this period of war: "How do we want to act? How do we want to remember?"