Interest brochure2  5/25/04  3:06 PM  Page 1

An Interest in Life

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cover: Brienne Arrington, SWM Wing Above Clouds
from the Holiday series, 2003, 35 mm slide

A few years ago we did an interview with John Baldessari’s psychiatrist. In the story, Gopnick’s psychiatrist: In the story, Gopnick’s doctor ends their final session with the sage observation that life has many worthwhile aspects. We were so impressed by the simple profundity of that statement, we used it as the title of a piece and it became our new favorite motto.

Some time after, we were invited to curate this show. We had the idea that our latest collaboration (this exhibition) might be connected in some fashion to our previous one (the interview). If in the interview we argued that life indeed has many worthwhile aspects, the next reasonable question might be: how are those aspects identified, by whom, and by what method?

That’s when Meg remembered a story by Grace Paley, a writer we both admire. In the story the main character states, “All that is necessary for survival of the fittest, it seems, is an interest in life, good, bad, or peculiar.” Agreeing with that and combining it with our previous motto, we arrived at the theme of this exhibition.

We believe that art functions to identify life’s many worthwhile aspects. Art can make stupid things seem important and supposedly important things seem stupid. We believe the necessary preliminary condition for art is an interest in life.

We are for an art that gives the feeling of enhancement and plenitude where nothing is too much, too foreign, too risky, or too silly. We are artists and curate art exhibitions as a hedge against the inartistic states: weariness, exhaustion, timidity and shame. The works in the exhibition are not linked by subject matter or method. They are linked by a quality of joy, by an interest in life, good, bad or peculiar. We feel the artists in the exhibition more or less agree.

Brienne Arrington’s work Holiday is a 35 mm slide projection of eighty slides, forming an around the world tour—a dream vacation with all the rainy days and crummy hotels edited out. The piece was created from an archive of over five thousand travel slides, shot by the amateur photographer, Joseph Shrawder, in the 1950’s through the 1980’s. From these slides the artist selected the eighty images that make up the work. Arrington got the archive from her stepfather, Carl Shrawder, Joseph’s son. Shown as a large scale projection, the piece is an opportunity for the audience to take a brief vacation with Shrawder as their unseen guide. According to Arrington, “Vacation slide shows allow the audience to feel as though they are participants in a holiday albeit, someone else’s. The lights go dim, the clicking of the projector becomes less apparent and the viewers are offered the chance to interact with foreign or familiar sites/people creating new narratives about what they are seeing. The viewer has the opportunity to transfer their position as a slide show viewer to other positions in relation to the projected image. In this instance, the viewer can become the photographer, or the subjects and in some cases the objects presented.”
In the essay titled “Why Look at Animals”, John Berger examines the centrality of animals to human life. He argues, “Animals first entered the human imagination as messengers and promise. Animals (once) constituted the first circle of what surrounded man.” Though Berger insists that that connection has been ruptured in contemporary times, the work of Erin Coggins suggests that animals (i.e., house pets) may continue to serve an oracular function. Coggins’s work, One Must Know the Animals: Excerpts From the Great Book of Watching, is a narrative video that examines the false dichotomies of good and evil as personified by two cats. The narrator uses the Great Book of Watching (a fictional reference to the real, albeit apocalyptic and apocalyptic text, Book of Enoch the Prophet) to document the cats’ contrary natures in hopes of unraveling the mystery of mankind. The piece uses the method of the naturalist to serve the ambition of the philosopher.

The mystery of life is revealed in the apparent world, in this case, by two cats wrestling on the living room rug. Georges Bataille in Theory of Religion states, “The animal opens before me a depth that attracts and is familiar to me. In a sense I know this depth: it is my own. It is farthest removed from me, that which deserves the name depth, which means precisely that which is unfathomable to me.” There is a good chance he was a cat lover.

Micol Hebron’s work in the exhibition demonstrates an “interest in life” by focusing on its most observable and confounding manifestation, oneself. The piece, Autobiography, is a single channel video where twenty or so participants perform using Hebron’s written autobiography as their script. Each participant was given a passage from Hebron’s autobiography and asked to memorize it the best they could. The results are mixed. Few recite the script verbatim, and many interject their own memories and interpretations. The steady stream of readers develops and completes the text and perpetually reimagines the “I” of the author.

In one sense Hebron’s work celebrates the inherent narcissism of the art making process. Everyone becomes Hebron. In another sense however, it demolishes the idea of a unitary self. Seemingly anyone can play the artist. The author becomes both everyone and no one in particular.

Usually when someone says, “that’s life,” what they mean is we are chained to the dreary status quo, so stop complaining. Fortunately or unfortunately, there are those among us who are seemingly unhinged enough to qualify as dreamers. Dreamers are the subject of Jen Liu’s work. The piece titled, Super BAND JWS, imagines a super rock group that includes the preacher/cult leader Jim Jones, David Bowie (as Ziggy Stardust) and Frank Lloyd Wright. The three members are connected in the artist’s view by their utopian fantasies be they horrors, vain or simply unlikely.

The similarity of the three is made by uniting them in a series of band/album/lyric/posters where the typical information is replaced with quotes from Jones’s sermons, Bowie’s lyrics or the writings of Frank Lloyd Wright. In one poster, the group bears a striking resemblance to the innovative German band Kraftwerk, and in another to the group, The Monkees. The far flung madness of the posters is accompanied by a karaoke video, which includes a generically bad synthesized “cover” of the David Bowie classic, “Ziggy Stardust.” The lyrics translated by Liu into Esperanto scroll past an image of a building being alternately covered in snow and engulfed in flames. The building itself is a sort of bad imitation of Wright’s Falling Water combined with elements of the buildings in Jonestown, Jones’ cult community in Guyana, South America. During the exhibition Liu will organize a performance with the assistance of several local bands. The original lyrics of their songs will be replaced by texts from Jim Jones’s sermons, which tend to be faith-building mixed with civil-rights-infected socialism.

Unless you have been personally socked in the jaw, most people fail to realize how hard a punch must land before your knees buckle and you lose consciousness. Similarly, few people know it, but it takes a formidable blow before you see the stars so commonly depicted in cartoons. This lack of a scientifically informed understanding of violence is surprising considering the ubiquity of grotesque violence in the daily news. You can literally get the shit kicked out of you, but few of us understand the mechanics of the procedure. Jennifer Nelson attempts to provide this understanding in her work, A Guide to the Kinesthetic Understanding of the News.

Nelson’s work is a performance (during the opening reception) where the artist gives a lecture about the “kinesthetic understanding of the news— a kind of choreographic understanding of the bodies affected by violence.” While the artist lectures in a quiet and instructive tone a model will undramatically and systematically read through the news, trying to learn the choreography of the bodies the news photographs depict. The activities of the artist and model will be simultaneously recorded by a small group of professional photographers equipped with constantly flashing cameras.

D’Ette Nogle’s work is perhaps the most apropos and least explicable piece in the exhibition. At the time of this writing we have no idea what she will do or if in fact she will do anything at all. We know that her works tend to be process oriented, site specific and generally require that the audience complete the work. In keeping with that strategy, Nogle will use the period of the exhibition to gather results, which may or may not form the work. It is equally possible that the procedure will yield some sort of “something” as it is possible it will result in nothing at all. As is typical for such uncharted adventures Nogle’s procedure has already caused some consternation for all concerned. That indeed is life and we say yes to it.

John Baldessari and Meg Cranston ©2003