

curated by:
John Baldessari
and Meg Cranston

February 5 - March 8, 2003

Brienne Arrington
Erin Cosgrove
Micol Hebron
Jen Liu
Jennifer Nelson
D'Ette Nogel

apexart curatorial program

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

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An Interest in Life

A
few years ago
we did an interview where
John told a story about the writer, Adam
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

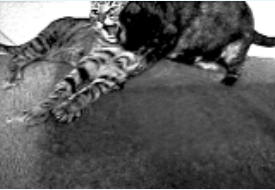
states, "All that is necessary for survival of the fittest, it
seems, is an interest in life, good, bad, or peculiar."
Agreeing with that and combining it with our previous
motto, we arrived at the theme of this exhibition.

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 enhance-
ment 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:
wariness, 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 inter-
est 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 pro-
jection 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 though 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
Shawder, Joseph's son. Shown as a large scale projec-
tion, 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 partici-
pants in a holiday albeit, someone else's. The lights go
dim, the clicking of the projector becomes less appar-
ent and the viewers are offered the chance to interact
with foreign or familiar sites/people creating new narra-
tives 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 Cosgrove suggests that animals (i.e. house pets) may continue to serve an oracular function. Cosgrove'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



Erin Cosgrove, *One Must Know the Animals: Excerpts From the Great Book of Watching*, 2003, narrative video, 7 minutes

fictional reference to the real, albeit apocryphal 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 reassigns the "I" of the author.



Micol Hebron, *Autobiography*, 2003, Digital Video (on DVD), perpetual work in progress

In one sense Hebron's work celebrates the inherent narcissism of the art making process. Everyone 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 horrid, vain or simply unlikely.

The similarity of the three is made by uniting them in a series of band/album/gig posters where the typical information is replaced with quotes from Jones' 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' sermons, which tend to be faith-healing mixed with civil-rights inflected socialism.

Unless you have been personally socked in the jaw, most people fail to realize actually 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*.



Jen Liu, *Super BAND JWS*, 2003, video still

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



Jennifer Nelson, *Clock*, 1999, performance with Glen Redpath, photograph

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.

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Mr. Baldessari is an artist and a Professor of Art at UCLA. Ms. Cranston is an artist, writer and a Professor of Art and Art Criticism at Otis College of Art and Design.