

Untitled 41

Interview with Bonnie Camplin by Cathrine Wood

10 March 2007

CW:

Before you made drawings and films, you were more involved in music and clubs, and you were a part of Mark Leckey's group donAtteller. How were those activities significant for you in terms of what you're making now?

BC:

I got into doing parties and club nights originally out of entrepreneurial drive, opportunity and obviously creativity. The art of a good party is in the word; it's making participants out of anticipants. You enable this with music and surroundings and the details and the host who is the catalyst. The instinct to belong and to enjoy meaningful shared experience is what the nightclub is all about. It has this in common with religious worship and other kinds of clubs and organizations. I just wanted things to happen all the time and for it to go all haywire. I was very into dressing and looks and dancing it all into a mess. When I first met Mark Leckey he asked me to be in DonAtteller mainly because of my look at the time and he had been to one of my clubs (HARD-ERFASTERLOUDER) and loved it. It was agreed that we had a shared sensibility. I loved working with Mark, Ed and Enrico making the music but I think a love of dressing up and dancing does not make you a stage performer and I often felt shy on stage which I never did in a disco. People who are able to get lost in a "performance state" are very rare. Really I'm a quiet private person and being in the realm of artefact is much better for my nerves. However I am only surviving, extemporizing, responding to the phenomena and synthesizing as always.

CW:

So the quieter practice of drawing or making films suits you better? You wrote in a recent text of the labour intensive process of making your drawings in HB pencil: "the sublime beauty is the evidence that I still own my time and labour. For a feminist and Marxist (self employed) who consciously participates in a free-market economy these things are important." What kind of relationship is embodied in the drawings between the making process, the image you choose and the labour-time relations you negotiate as a working artist?

BC:

When I started making those drawings it was not to illustrate a theory it was because I wanted to see if I could commit to something that might take a long time. The concept of longevity was foreign to me. The last time I had done a proper drawing, as in a proper sustained "study" of something was at school. For years the only things I had made was photographs and photomontages. I have always collected books that have a lot of really great images in them. So I had a lot of fabulous images and lots of time and no money. Choosing an image it is just whether it reminds me of melancholy then taking the colour out of melancholy leaves you with that other thing called ennui which is worse.

In terms of style I am just reproducing the image to the best of my technical ability which is roughly equal to that of an A level Art student.

To answer your art market question: When I said I was a self employed Marxist participating in a free-market economy I was pointing up that if I internalised those conflicts then I would go mad. That's what an artist does; they externalise those conflicts. The onus is on the artist to transcend the forces that kill freedom and life. If they succeed then they provide some meaning and therefore salvation; a great work of art is something charged with uncanny properties (aura) which makes it priceless. The monetary value it acquires is due to the artist having to make a living and all the other factors are because so does everyone else involved.

CW:

I also wanted to ask you about the idea of the artist as 'aristocrat', thinking about Thorstein Veblen's 'theory of the leisure class' in which he describes the way that the moneyed 'leisure class' demonstrate their wealth by engaging in time-consuming but non-productive labour, such as learning obsolete languages or knowing about fancy dog-breeding. Does this have any resonance with your perception of the artist's position, going against the grain of being 'efficient' with time? I was thinking about the labour intensity of your drawings being at odds with a productive, capitalist attitude.

BC:

Economics is all about distortion. Once you recognize its elasticity you are free to set your own value on your time and labour (at least in a culture such as ours).

Re the artist as aristocrat: The way I describe it is to live "The Invented Life". The other alternative for an imaginative, sensitive person of scant means is just too hideous to mention.

CW:

Why were you interested in longevity, and why was it foreign to you?

How does the idea of longevity and labour-intensive drawing relate to the way you deal with time in your films? I am thinking particularly about your Frieze film commission from 2006, the 'Special Afflictions by Roy Har-ryhozen'.

BC:

Longevity hit me as a concept when I reached the age of thirty which I never thought I would. (It isn't such an arbitrary number. In the film "Logan's Run" the age of thirty is when you are terminated as it is roughly the age at which humans begin to deteriorate) Growing up with M.A.D. i.e. Mutually Assured Destruction (My Dad was obsessed with it). Constantly uprooting and moving home throughout childhood, Parents dying young etc. Everything I did was informed by a strong feeling of "Well I might die tomorrow!" and "The world could end tomorrow!". I really felt it and believed it. This can easily manifest itself as a death wish and self destructive behaviour. Also because I associated ideas of commitment and long term investment with conservative values. I couldn't continue in that manner though because far from being a liberating force it was quite exhausting and debilitating for me. So it was quite a relief and a revelation coming to terms with the concept of longevity. The idea of longevity and labour-intensive drawing relates directly to how I dealt with time in "Special Afflictions by Roy Harryhozen": The "Special Afflictions" in question are each of a temporal nature. Each character's identity is defined by the nature of their particular "Special Affliction" or as in the language of cinema their "Special Effect". John Prolong is slow in his delivery; he is "time-stretched", Scratch the Hat is like an eighties "Scratch-film"; he scrubs backwards and forwards through his speech and gets stuck like a scratched CD, Lady Silba has a kind of catatonic affliction causing her to sporadically get "stuck in a moment". She also appears to be rather crudely "animated" a la "Claymation". Fox is essentially a "still" but his anima is contained in a bell jar in the form of compressed wild dogs. In this film special effects are just a metaphor for psychic damage caused by life events but specifically the consequences of creative acts (or visions acted out) by humans on other humans. Religious people believe that life was "designed" by a God whereas Atheists believe that God is a human invention. Roy Harryhozen represents God and he represents the other creator, the artist; both are fallible and a potential disaster because both are only human. If you have an imagination it is vital that you have the vigilance not to become a casualty of it.

CW:

Is your desire to expose the manipulative potential of your medium to do with the fact that you have said you no longer watch tv or listen to radio, do not have tolerance for 'mainstream media' any more? Do you have tolerance for, or believe in, subculture as an alternative?

BC:

Subculture is a group response to the oppressive forces within the pervading culture. It's transient by nature. I imagine it's always existed and always will. In rich Western cultures it is impossible for a person over the age of 30 to participate in its more energetic versions or truly understand it or even be aware of it. Middle aged people who participated in the relevant subculture of their own generation who complain that there's no valid one today can't bear the idea that their days of raw vitality are over yet they can't even imagine what form it would take and they can't see the contradiction in this fact. This is due to changes in their metabolism. All that's left for them to do is to stop watching TV and still they don't. Probably, the hardest part in an age of insidious marketing/ industrialized desire etc is to identify the thing in your culture that's not working for you or your group. It's like cancer. Cancer is not foreign matter it is just a proliferation of the tissue that you're made of. Mind you, Permaculture has wicker doors open to us all. So do most alternative cultures if you share their values. But don't be surprised when you realize the reactionary aspect to them all. But The real freaks are the ones who exist solely on a diet of mainstream culture ; the sick wretched fish-heads.

CW:

Is there a link between this conception of 'cancer' and the film Cancer that you made? I was thinking of this in terms of a kind of entropic relationship between representation and what is represented: the destructing pixels and the way that you transpose an image into a highly worked pencil surface that obsessively covers every inch of the paper, kind of petrifying it?

BC:

When I made the "Cancer" video I was not thinking of mainstream culture actually I was thinking of the fact of Cancer and how it relates to proliferation of life and to creativity. I was symbolically disrupting/ corrupting/ invading the very fabric of the fact, partly demonstrating my basic doubts about the value of facts. I have a liking for disrupting the picture plane (in some of the videos) and fixating on the surface of the image (in the HB pencil drawings) as the source of horror and claustrophobia within the act of perception. There is this thing that some people get which is like a macro very close proximity kind of hallucination which elicits a primal gag reflex kind of thing. I used to get it when I stared at the wall as I drifted off to sleep and would start to get this memory or something almost of being microscopic and the texture of the wall is suddenly like magnified/ amplified loads of rubbery fingers pushing in your face only you don't have a face as such it isn't even a visual thing just this sightless wordless yet physical primal awareness of proximity to something else. It's a pre-lingual kind of thing that's impossible to describe accurately in words.

CW:

You describe yourself as a feminist. How do you see feminism at this point in time, and how is that a part of the historical Feminist movement? Are your collaborations with other female artists such as Lucy Mckenzie and Paulina Olowka, or indeed your involvement in the collective activity of donAteller, a part of these politics?

BC:

I am a feminist. If women have a deep sense of themselves within the world then it's good for the world because women have egos and women are mothers; if they're oppressed then the world pays the price because the only domain of influence then left for the woman is the one over her own child. Hysterical mothers make hysterical misogynist men out of sons. Also oppressed hysterical mothers take it out on their daughters especially when the daughter reaches adolescence. Woman's pleasure and sense of self is not at the expense of man's. Men would be so much happier in a truly matriarchal society. A man's physical strength belongs to women and children; it's a mistake to think that it's to enable him to subdue and control woman. Something which is overlooked in our culture is the destructive force of misandry i.e. a woman's hatred of men. The reason it's overlooked is that it's so institutionalized and so ingrained. It's actually assumed and accepted that women hate men but that's because the oppression of women is assumed and accepted. Also a woman's hatred of men when openly expressed is wrongly deemed as ineffectual. I dislike it when women refuse to acknowledge feminism. I couldn't be friends with a woman who wasn't a feminist. My collaborations with Paulina are based on shared feminist values and sisterhood but importantly we are both very interested in femininity.

BC's exhibition at Cabinet, Phases of a Lady's Modesty, ran from 18th February to 17th March 07
Bonnie Camplin and Paulina Olowka had a shared exhibition due to open at Portikus in Frankfurt, 25th May 07,
"Salty Water"/ " What of Salty Water".