

NAMELESS SWIRLS, AN UNFOLDING IN PRÉSENCE

Interview with Jennifer Tee, Roé Cerpac, Harmen Liemburg, Erwan Mahéo

Philip van den Bossche (2003)

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In the following interview various trails or threads to the exhibition *Nameless Swirls, An Unfolding in Presence* are discussed.

Phillip van den Bossche (PB): Before we discuss the exhibition, I'd like to ask you all about the collaboration, about the talks you had over the past months. Jennifer can you tell me something about how the collaboration started?

Jennifer Tee (JT): In recent years the process to arrive at a work has become increasingly important to me. The way you work, the mood you're working in, the people you meet. All that comes together in my installations. I really enjoy meeting other people through my work. I like the liveliness of an opening and I'm interested in performance. The work of the Brazilian artist Oiticica is also a benchmark for me. I was seriously involved for several months with the idea of the festival. (Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980) developed interactive installations and works in the 1960s and 1970s in which the audience could participate. In a critical and original way Oiticica reframed modernist aesthetic issues by translating them directly into life and the human body.).

PB: The artist Hélio Oiticica (1937–1980) and Öyvind Fahlström (1928–1976) played a major role in your exhibition *In Air / Presume. The Non-Logical Hunt for Toverkna!* (2001) in Museum Het Domein in Sittard. Moreover, the installation was initiated via a performance. In one way or another you always look for a form of collaboration – with your own family, Mongolian throat singers and so on.

PB: But now you're working for the first time, I believe, with fellow artists?

JT: What I like about collaborations is the feeling that you learn something from someone else. Working with other artists is also a way of answering questions for yourself, questions you have about life. From the beginning I had the idea of working with other people in the project for the Van Abbemuseum, not necessarily from the art world but also from

other knowledge fields. When I was in Mongolia, my first destination on my long trip, I found a text about a place called Kharkhorum. This place was a sort of centre of the world, where people from everywhere, like scholars, tried to learn from each other. It is now a forgotten place, but I like the idea that at a moment in time this place once existed for fifty years. In one writing I read that a silver tree had stood in the middle of this citadel, which was created by a French artist. It is an oral story handed down and that's what I liked about it: that you actually don't know what really happened. But it was a source of inspiration - someone from afar was invited to create the tree. When we began to talk about the realisation of this project, I was thinking of what someone could contribute and add and how things could also overlap. I was looking for a shared mentality, certain sensitivity. I thought that that could produce a really experimental collaboration. Ro   is someone who doesn't make visible works, Erwan works more from a sculpture background while Harmen has a more two dimensional approach. I simply envisaged that together we could reach something. It was a gamble.

PB: Erwan, could you tell me something about this first contact and the beginning of the collaboration?

Erwan Mah  o (EM): I didn't know Ro   and Harmen and Jennifer only slightly. The good feeling I had about this came when Jennifer talked to me about her intentions and about Kharkhorum. That was a kind of meeting place and had something of the idea of a forum or agora, like the Greeks had, a place where everybody could speak freely. In my eyes the ancient Greeks enriched the notion of society through this freedom of expression, by creating a space where everyone could tell their stories. That same process was our starting point. We were all trying to get our ideas off the ground. In the beginning we were all talking from our own experiences and feelings. Jennifer already had a brief text about the idea of the festival on paper. We started from this idea of creating a new world, a kind of movement, but not a hermetic scene. We were not trying to change the real society, but trying more to create our own little movement. A society related to our personality, but which is not trying to set an example or provide rules. My own work is related to the idea of space. To me space means a relationship between mental space or dreams, the physical space and an activity-taking place within that. It was really nice to discover the dreams of the others, to speak of ideas from our own worlds. Interweaving these dreams was like making music, mixing sound. It starts off in a sense with different tracks and we play these together in order to create one song.

PB: Harmen, you worked before with Jennifer on the catalogue for her exhibition in Sittard. In what way was this collaboration similar or different to the previous time?

Harmen Liemburg (HL): When Jennifer and I were working together, we were actually with three people, with Richard Niessen as well. During the making of this publication it was clear that Jennifer and I shared a lot of interests. I think we both share a love for multilayered images that offer a lot of detail from other visual cultures in the world, images that have a naive touch about them and a certain playfulness. I thought it was very interesting to do the publication because we were given every freedom to explore Jennifer's world view and to record this in our own manner. I asked Jennifer to make drawings for the publication based on various works and these formed sort of Lego blocks for my own imagination. Our visual ideas and fantasies fit together quite well. We didn't need a lot of words to combine the things I have in mind with her elements - that was kind of special. I always had the feeling we should continue our collaboration. But that is only one aspect. I always wanted to print on textiles, like Jennifer had done earlier on. With this project I can take on a new experiment and use the silkscreen technique on fabric to suggest more than I'm used to from my graphic design background. After working five years as graphic designer, I felt increasingly uncomfortable in this role because the urge to tell my own story became more and more important. For me this collaboration is an opportunity to work from that need.

PB: Before we talk about the exhibition and the ideas involved, I would like to ask Roé the same question. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you have worked before with Jennifer. Maybe you can explain something about your work and your relationship with Jennifer and what you thought initially about this collaboration between the four of you?

Roé Cerpac (RC): Jennifer and Erwan were talking about the enjoyment of collaboration. This feeling of really doing things together from different points and angles. And maybe looking at the same point. That is the way I see my role as an artist and person in the world. Not so much as something conceptual, but as a feeling. In a way my identity is determined by working with other people. So in a sense that feeling Jennifer was talking about suited me. Sharing what we do is like a certain kind of festival, an event, and that is in keeping with my work. I always connect it to presence. People ask me what medium I work in and then I reply, presence. It's being in a situation with all the senses. Jennifer expressed this very well in an earlier interview - she called it being a kind of lens. In itself a lens is transparent, but it changes how you see things and how you look for things. I often function as a lens for others. I look for the point where the lenses of various people come together and see the same. New for me here is that I'm also asked about my own background and the way my own lens was created; my reference framework if you like, that determines the way I look.

PB: Can you say something about the components and concept of the exhibition, about what we will be able to see in it? The image of the caravan, for instance.

RC: It was something we talked about at the very beginning when everything was still unclear. We began with a completely abstract feeling towards the exhibition, an idea of movement. Thus we arrived at the notion of this caravan, which has moments of carrying, standing still, lying down, resting perhaps. Then suddenly unpacking all the canvas and putting up the tents.

JT: From this caravan comes the image of the camel, of which there is a stuffed version in the exhibition. The caravan moves through a landscape to a certain place and there everything is unpacked and displayed. It is a metaphor for many issues, including the way we are working on the exhibition, as well as the feeling we want the exhibition to evoke - that something has been brought from somewhere without you really knowing where it comes from. I like that. It is also the feeling of the desert itself, where there appears to be no beginning and no end, just millions of grains of sand which form the desert. RC: It is in fact an environment in which you have to navigate, you can get lost in it very easily. In making this exhibition we are actually navigating as one person, and we could also get lost.

PB: Doesn't this have something to do with the aspect of mapping as well? Can you say something about this?

EM: The idea of mapping from my point of view is really important, also in my own work. Mapping for me is a kind of way to be involved in a scene and at the same time to see this from above. Mapping is an attempt to understand where you are and what you're experiencing. You can link this for instance to certain photographs by Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy. They appear to have been made from a viewpoint above the earth, in order to show the outline of the world, society, a city, architecture or other similar things. In this way you have an entirely different image of the world in which you live. It is about a double take on things. It is similar to the work of the landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx. You can walk in the city, see some trees and a few city elements, but you don't really notice all these things as part of a larger design. However, if you are aware and think about the work, you see all the things. Suddenly the street is an abstract composition, a drawing worked out and precise. This double experience is really important to me in what we're doing now. We are trying to work in dark, unknown terrain and at the same time trying to find our way in this darkness.

RC: Making an exhibition is kind of like designing a park. We use elements like science, history and travel, trying to create an environment,

although it is a project with much improvisation. We seem to share some kind of feeling about every space in the museum. I don't think the exhibition will explain anything or make a specific point, it's extremely intuitive. I hate the word, but it's the best word I can come up with now.

EM: In this way we arrived at Guy Debord's *Discours sur les passions de l'amour*, the map we really wanted in the exhibition. It is a so-called 'psycho' geographic map. I think you've said everything when you say that, because it's a kind of geography. It's not mapping in the sense of measuring, but based on psychological circumstances or processes. According to this way, we tried to find a geographical way out of this. The parallel with the map is important for me. I actually think the title of the map is as important as the map itself.

PB: In a practical sense there will be existing works, cards and objects in the exhibition, like a stick by Andre Cadere. What is Cadere's role? And the same question can be applied to the model of Kharkhorum and Raum der Gegenwart by Moholy-Nagy.

JT: Cadere's stick has to do with the different trails we're following. We are all bringing something and we are all following what we are bringing. And this stick comes from you. You showed me the museum and you said you particularly like this piece, and it was just a stick in the corner of a room. There are many other art works there you could like more, but there was something about this quite simple stick you liked. You said you would like it if I would be interested in the collection of the museum, like with Oiticica in Sittard. That it would play more of a mental than a physical role. What I like about the stick, is the metaphor of the walking stick which you hold in your hand and which takes you somewhere.

PB: I once read a banal question in a magazine which asked various people who they would like to be if they had the choice. And almost everybody mentioned people, apart from one woman who replied she'd loved to have been one of Andre Cadere's sticks.

EM: You must think of Cadere's stick as a kind of meditation. You're trying to find some direction and to find a way in this sea or desert or night. An historical piece can help in this. It's stable, I mean, it exists, it's known and you can read books about it. But at the same time it's something that is based on the idea of movement and discussion. By just leaving this object in the corner of a gallery or a museum it is everything but a stable work at the same time.

PB: And what about this unrealised project by Moholy-Nagy?

EM: Of course it's a kind of quotation, but I hope it's more than that. The Licht Raum Modulator is an important work for me. It's part of the

museum collection and for me Moholy-Nagy is one of the major artists from the 20th century. *Raum der Gegenwart* is a work that never actually existed. It is about the idea of space, creating a space which is a total space in a way. For me this is the interesting thing. The creating of a world is what we are busy doing in this exhibition. For me it was interesting not to try to make this work, as it would have been in the thirties when Moholy-Nagy was still living. I try to create a network that is related to this not realised project, but which isn't precisely the situation of this work. For me it is related to a kind of projection space, because it will be a sort of rotating lamp with projections of the map all around, so that it's really a kind of space. You look at this object, and for me it has something to do with a form of thinking, with the projecting of ideas. It is more a 'treatment' about the original work.

JT: I like to see all the images which we're going to put in the exhibition working, it is something liberating in a way. All the images and sculptures which we use, everything we've been talking and reading about – they are going to be somewhere in these new objects but you cannot point them out precisely. It is just like a book with essays. I think you can sense the background of something, so for me I firmly feel a kind of unconscious energy – rather than a message – radiating from these objects. That is important for me. That is also why to me one thing connects with the other, and why all these things together draw together and complete all these ideas. I always hope the work I make is more intelligent than myself. Now there are the four of us, that applies even more. I hope that the final installation, the exhibition, is more intelligent than us – it is about the energy and relationship between the various objects.