

JOYFULL LIMBO

NOTES ON JENNIFER TEE

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from: *E*V*O*L E*Y*E LAND*S-END*

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Artist publication: Jennifer Tee i.c.w Richard Niessen

In Borges' story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, the reader learns of the history of a forgotten land. It starts with the author's discovery of an entry in an encyclopaedia referring to Uqbar, a country that appears to have existed at one time somewhere in the depths of Asia Minor. Subsequent editions of the encyclopaedia no longer contain the article about Uqbar – a mysterious omission that inspires a complicated bibliographical search for information regarding the geographical, cultural and philosophical history of the country. Here, Borges employs his most effective technique: the mixing of factual and fictional situations, people and places. The question of authenticity serves as a steppingstone for an imaginative and labyrinthine exploration of alternative concepts of time and history, in which the comfortable certainties of Western subjective philosophy are playfully unsettled. The reader is left with a feeling of freedom, openness and wonder, of endless creative possibility: each corner turned holds a new adventure in stall, a side-track of the familiar and the matter-of-course – a whole new world.

At a time when artistic production is increasingly influenced and informed by global political developments, with art assuming a variety of roles vis-à-vis the public - socio-political researcher, reporter, critic - an artistic approach that is characterized by playfulness and exuberance can be felt as a relief. The celebration of the subjective experience - the equally challenging and risky undertaking that the playful unleashing of one's imaginative powers can amount to – lies at the heart of Jennifer Tee's work. Her sculptures, installations and performances serve as pre-conditions, as the permeable boundaries of a domain where the structure of our cultivated mental processes is dissolved and re-informed. They are constructed situations, whose moment of effect precedes their rational reception, creating a fleeting period of time in which the unknown, the unexpected, the exotic and the mysterious can come into play. This temporal space, in which the artist attempts to bring about an intense and liberating 'experience of the moment', has no finality, no central focus, but rather exists as a structure of possibilities and references – perpetually incomplete, to no apparent purpose, inconclusive. In this process, the Borgesean labyrinth is never far off.

" ... the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms..."

Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*

In Jennifer Tee's art, the social component is active at two distinct levels: the research of social histories and their aesthetics, which precedes the production of her work, and the bringing together of people via performative actions during openings or at other moments throughout the period of an exhibition. Both impulses are strongly informed by Johan Huizinga's definition of the *homo ludens*, man at play. According to Huizinga, the instinct to play is a driving force of the human impulse to act: in the social structure, 'play' precedes culture, that what is acquired throughout one's life. As a result, 'play' lies at the foundation of all archetypal activity in society, including cultural production – it can even be said that in truly great cultural expressions the instinct to play is of overriding importance. According to Huizinga, 'play' is more than mere instinct. It strongly influences social processes, and is closely related to 'serious' concepts like the ritual – another phenomenon that quickly comes to mind when considering the performative aspects of Tee's work.

Two historical movements seem of particular relevance when discussing the artist's incorporation of the element of play within her work: that of the avant-garde of the 1920s, and of the Situationists in the '50s and '60s. Duchamp, Dada and the Surrealists plied game strategies in order to create a space within the boundaries of the artwork. This space exists outside of daily reality, it forms a domain with its own rules and codes. It brings about an alternative concentration of time, where the state of freedom is created that is necessary to bring the subconscious and the spontaneous to light. In the artwork, the restrictive conditions of 'ordinary' life are suddenly withdrawn. Tee seeks to create worlds that, suspended between moments of day-to-day reality, can function as a transitional phase, similar to the dream's role in the work of the Surrealists. The phrase 'limbo' recurs in a number of pieces; a word with religious connotations. Although religion is never the subject in a literal, descriptive sense, such references are ubiquitous in Tee's work. They allow for situations where playfulness is both an expression of childlike naiveté and a serious contemplation of sacral experience.

An important point of reference, when considering this quest for experience that lies outside the rational and the structured, can be found in the notions of Guy Debord and the Situationists. Their explicitly unplanned searches for spontaneous poetic experience in daily life were a critical reaction to the commodified and mediatized 'society of the spectacle'. In such a society, 'real', authentic experience has become unattainable through the omnipresence of the 'spectacle': radio,

television, advertisements and other media that are solely focussed on providing entertainment and instant one-dimensional consumption. It is in particular the strategies developed by the Situationists that inform Tee's work - concepts like the *dérive* (drifting randomly through the metropolitan environment) and psychogeography (the reinterpretation of the city on the basis of personal experiences and emotions). These strategies aim to help the individual break away from the spectacle and experience moments of unforeseen poetic intensity. In a similar vein, Tee's art works toward the creation of associative connections between locations, maps, found and fabricated artefacts, exotic cultures and personal mythologies. Her installations offer a mental journey, full of sidetracks, in which the lost idyll of living according to our most primitive instincts is submitted to a reevaluation. It is not a journey that goes from A to B, but rather one that circumvents the material, disclosing itself in several stages. Images, signs and symbols that refer to exotic religions and cultures are repeated in progressive mutation within a single work. This leads to situations of recognition and confusion, of the reassessment of what has already been experienced, and, ultimately, to a sense of liberation in a single glorious moment.

" Journeys, those magic caskets full of dreamlike promises, will never again yield their treasures untarnished. A proliferating and overexcited civilization has broken the silence of the seas once and for all. The perfumes of the tropics and the pristine freshness of human beings have been corrupted by a busyness with dubious implications, which mortifies our desires and dooms us to acquire only contaminated memories."

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

In an age where the whole world has been opened up and mapped out, and the last secrets of distant, isolated cultures have been disclosed, we continue to look for alternatives to fulfil our basic need for the unknown, the intense adventure of discovery. Jennifer Tee's recent work often contains the traces of journeys made by the artist, of sojourns abroad where she has undertaken a study of the local society and culture. These traces are not presented as factual research, but are related to it nonetheless, in that they offer an alternative to traditional ethnography. To an extent, one could call Tee's work anti-didactic, as it makes no attempt to relay to the viewer the knowledge she has acquired during her travels and research, nor does it try to shed light on the meaning of the omnipresent exotic, mystic and mythological symbolism. The opposite rather seems to be the case: meaning and purpose are often obscured and revitalized through a lengthy process of personal interpretation, reception and artistic transformation.

This reworking conspires to lend the research component in Tee's work a playful, fictional character. The results of her studies are used to

create new, loving connections between visual elements from various (primitive) cultures, their social and philosophical importance and our contemporary Western frame of reference. This is not a question of presenting a truth or a normative judgement, but rather of closing in on the subjective experience of an emphatically artificial new world.

Through the use of formal, intrinsic and material references, the artist establishes a personal relationship with her 'research area', one that goes beyond noncommittal appropriation. In the preliminary stages of a project, Tee often seeks out the local population, in an attempt to gain insight in local social relationships and practices. One could say that behind the openness of her work - these veiled games, loose ends and labyrinthine turns - lies an essentially structuralist program. Wherever the artist may be, in each new environment she seeks out the local rituals that separate those present from the daily routine through a system of precepts and codes. She searches for a state of 'being apart together', a condition that creates a feeling of communality, for example - one that joins the participants together in their shared experience of the exceptional and the extraordinary. At the other end of the artistic process - the 'final product', as we must often view the exhibition - the audience is offered a similar experience. But by now we are fully immersed in the realm of Jennifer Tee.

At the start of this process, one finds the images, patterns, materials and structures that serve as inspiration for the project at hand. They are collected on the basis of certain common aesthetic characteristics and intuitive intrinsic similarities - although their original histories and meaning are often widely divergent. At the end of the process, one finds the intention to form these disparate elements into a larger narrative, a structure that allows layers of meaning to develop and provides the viewer with the opportunity to determine and experience his or her place in the narrative. The work's effect is not limited to the periods of intense social activity during an exhibition (the opening, a performance). At quieter moments the work continues to prompt a consideration of the Other, the unknown, and to increase the viewer's awareness of his or her socio-cultural position, providing him with the opportunity to temporarily assume an alternative identity.

In Tee's recent work, this transient effect has become an important factor in its own right. Playing with the notion of the art piece as an event or 'festival', it features many pieces that centre on a performative action - by the artist, a third party or the audience themselves. The festival suggests a one-off event, a moment of intensity, a heightened state of awareness within the boundaries that have been formulated especially for the occasion, boundaries that place the experience outside of daily reality. The performative action can constitute the core of the work at hand, as is the case for instance with Tee's collaborations with a group

of Mongolian throatsingers. Here, the performance is the actual work and the festival's one-off nature is expressed most concretely. Or it can involve the presentation of the remains of a performance, or of objects that suggest a ritual purpose or invite one to act, to become a participant. The artist's festival intensifies life, by focusing on love and vitality – it brims with the dazzling, bubbly sensation of celebration. Her installations tell a multitude of stories, simultaneously. In these stories, the notion of authorship is put at risk: fact and fiction have become indistinguishable and merge into a fluent narrative. In a sense, the artist thus surrenders authorship to the audience. The viewer is invited to make his own interpretation, write her own history. To find his or her personal Uqbar –whether it exists or not does not really matter in the end.