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Dissolving Logic in H2O

Michael Jones McKean and Christopher Cook conducted the following interview via e-mail November 28–December 31, 2006, on behalf of the exhibition The Possibility of Men and the River Shallows at DiverseWorks.

Christopher Cook: In an early discussion about *The Possibility of Men and the River Shallows*, you referenced Les Blank's documentary film *Burden of Dreams* (1982), which charts the ambitious production of Werner Herzog's epic movie *Fitzcarraldo* (also 1982), in which Herzog claims "art is the articulation of dreams." In general, what parallels do you see between Herzog's film and your current installation?

Michael Jones McKean: In his film, Herzog is courting belief by getting as close as he possibly can to failure. When you start to risk failure on such an epic and panoramic scale you also open up the possibility for something wonderful to happen. I believe the film has flaws, but his central metaphor—getting a giant riverboat over a mountain in the jungle—is something so beautifully illogical, something so incredibly difficult on a Sisyphean level, that the undertaking defaults to a kind of awkward majesty and beauty. I like these moments when logic breaks down. It causes us to scramble around a bit while we try to invent or find a different kind of meaning.

CC: Knowing the enormous amount of research, time, and labor that contributed to the realization of *The Possibility of Men and the River Shallows*—a highly complex project —I think it's fair to say you probably came close to stressing the limitations of your own abilities, both physically and mentally. Do you feel you risked failure with the creation of this piece?

MJM: Lately I've begun to understand failure and success as living in close proximity to one another. With two opposing forces occupying nearly the same psychic space, the small gap between them becomes an extreme location. I like to imagine the work trying to negotiate this charged space, where it has to strain to keep everything together. But this stress also forces the work to cultivate its own inner logic, its own bizarrely syncopated cadence. This is where the work scares me. When I try to remove the ego involved in making and just imagine myself alone with *The Possibility of Men and the River Shallows,* an intense feeling of fear wells up inside me. Like I can't understand this thing I made, like it somehow got too far away from me.

Perhaps this has something to do with failure. The proposition of trying to physically articulate the strangeness you uncover while digging around in your head, to actually construct a "thing," is steeped in risk. But this situation is precisely where chaotic, grandiose failure exists (which is perhaps what Les Blank meant when he titled his film *Burden of Dreams*). There's an awesome poetic potential in the moment you decide to make something, in part, because it requires you to also ask a salient question—you question representation. But this moment of poetry and grace ends once work begins. Here is where the gulf between skill and thought painfully announces itself. Once nimble ideas and fantasies become encrusted in base materiality. Yet we keep returning to this moment because this is what we have: materials, objects, experiences—things we keep trying to fill with structure and meaning.

CC: As with much of your work, you present a bountiful grouping of seemingly disparate objects, such as a handmade forty-foot cross section of a paddlewheel steamboat, a highly collectable 1980s boom box, various house plants with grow lights, and an over-

sized industrial fan, that introduce and intertwine myriad associations, histories, and mythologies. What do you consider the primary narratives in this work?

MJM: It's tricky because the work is purposefully structured to have a tenuous relationship with narration. The work alludes to a set of convergent themes and overarching narrative systems, but lacks the glue to hold everything together cogently. There's dissonance. Maybe a more useful analogy is to imagine the objects within the project as points in a constellation; together they form a shape, an abstraction larger then themselves, yet separately they still maintain their own discreet measures of value and meaning.

In some respects it's not much different from a film or a novel; what's actually at stake is not what's exactly represented on the page or screen—a bunch of primates yowling at a black rectangle or a one-legged captain throwing harpoons at a giant whale, or a man drifting down a river to find Kurtz. What's at stake are the ideas between the sentences, pages, and images. I like to think about my work in this way. But it's essential to point out that sculpture lacks a basic ingredient within these traditional modes of narration: linear time. Without linear time a narrative can never begin or end. It can only swirl around, suggesting, proposing, and looping. It dissolves and hopefully recovers, but only to dissolve again. The work destroys the possibility of narrative order by denying access to causality. In a sense, the project struggles with itself by liberally co-opting traditional theatrical tropes (signifiers of narration) only to turn around and deconstruct a story to it's essential parts. What remains are props, sets, stages, characters, and costumes, but they're divorced from the comfortablity of cause and effect as a direct link to meaning.

CC: So would you say your work is largely about exploring states of in-betweeness: the spaces between experience and perception, understanding and meaning, fantasy and reality, success and failure?

MJM: I'm trying to understand things I can barely see, but still believe are palpable and real. In relation to your question about in-betweeness, I prefer to think of it as walking from the center of something to the most remote edge. In the process, you hopefully see an accurate picture, one generated by measuring a "thing" from the inside out. But this strategy is arguably more self-destructive because it places one squarely within the "thing." You go from observer to explorer. What's lost is the cleaner, more clinical observational vantage of the birds-eye-view, but what's gained is all the grit and local flavor that comes with being on the ground. You also get lost a lot more this way.

CC: Throughout this project, you introduce viewers to a broad range of characters, from Mark Twain and Moby Dick to Donald Crowhurst and the jazz legend Albert Ayler. In your eyes, what are some of the bridges that connect these historical figures?

MJM: On some level it's strange to mention the characters because they're invisible in the project; they act as ghosts. Their existence only lives through a set of visual or audible cues. For instance, a harpoon acts as a trigger for Ahab, or a whale, or the ocean. I imagined an eccentric group of tragic, martyr-like figures racing through time to meet up on a strange, awkwardly majestic, bygone craft: a riverboat. The riverboat also metaphorically acts like a ghost because it doesn't exist materially anymore. It's misunderstood collective image exists primarily through the blurry lens of romantic nostalgia. In reality riverboats were unwieldy, inefficient, and actually violent. Just imagine a floating, human-made, faux-baroque island with a giant, oftentimes exploding, pressure-cooking engine that fed on the surrounding forests as it floated down a river. It's a quintessential image of inchoate modernism and the beginnings of the American empire. It's also an image that stands largely upon slave labor, gambling, prostitution, expansionism, and manifest destiny. Yet somehow the image of a riverboat still manages to occupy a romantic and heroic position within our collective understanding of the American past.

Related tangentially to the riverboat are the figures you asked about: Donald Crowhurst, an amateur yachtsman who attempted a non-stop, solo circumnavigation of the world in the 1960s; Albert Ayler, a free jazz saxophonist in the 1960s; and Hernando De Soto, a Spanish Conquisidor who was supposedly the first European to see the Mississippi. The riverboat seemed like a fitting meeting place since all their deaths were connected to

water. Crowhurst, after going insane, jumped into the Atlantic never to be seen again. Ayler's body, amidst controversy and mystery, washed ashore the East River. De Soto's body was sunk to the bottom of the Mississippi after succumbing to fever brought on by crossing the river. Through my own project, I began to recognize each of them as explorers in stubborn pursuit of ancient glory—to be seers, to find transcendence. The problem was that the scope of their dreams pitted them against nature and ultimately their own corporeality.

CC: An integral component to this project is the self-contained "storm chamber"—a large wooden structure that holds a life-size model of a ship's pilot house, rocking back and forth as it is washed by sheets of water. The illusion of a wayward ship navigating a stormy night is quite impressive. Outside of the container, however, all of the mechanics—water tank, fog machine, dehumidifier, water pump, circuit breakers—are clearly evident. In one theatrical act, you present the fantasy while calling attention to its artifice. What's your reasoning behind this decision?

MJM: A lot of my work presents an image but also reveals the inner workings of what makes it possible. I've always imagined my work as a theater where all sides of its production are visible; where infrastructure and image merge. It's like exposing a trick or pulling back the curtain to reveal the complicated inner workings of something. Wonder always melts away, and what's left is sad, rigged-up phoniness—a clunky analogue to a pleasing image.

CC: In exposing the truth within the fantasy—the voice behind the curtain—profound ideas and emotions can be unearthed, but perhaps not completely conveyed. Words and ideas fall short somewhere, unable to express something abstract or difficult. You've likened this feeble attempt to a love song, signified in this project with tracks by the band Hall and Oates. Can you expand on this notion and explain why you selected Hall and Oates to express such ideas?

MJM: What you say is true. A love song tries to pronounce an elusive feeling. Yet we manage to have moments of inspired musical perfection where people pulled it together and distilled love into three minutes of perfectly formed material. For me, this act verges on mysticism. As I was working on the project I began to understand my own impulse to make as no different than the urge to write a love song. It's as though I was trying to get the project to believe and give meaning to an idea that's much bigger than itself. However, it doesn't have the proper tools. It runs into problems. It runs aground.

As far as curating Hall and Oates into the project, I liked how they added incongruency. Their presence felt like a rogue, awkward, but sincerely calculated error—the kind that forces one to reconcile with an image on different terms. I also like how they seemed to flatten any hierarchical orders. There are some sidebar facts about Hall and Oates that place them squarely within the project's inner constellation: Hall met Oates when Crowhurst was contemplating death in the Atlantic and Ayler was performing a haunting eulogy at John Coltrane's funeral. I like to think of these moments as fated, as linked within an alternate cosmic order. And Hall and Oates go by H2O for short…too perfect.

CC: *The Great Circuit Project* (2004–07), which you produced in collaboration with the University of Kansas's Geography and Cartography departments, also undergoes an exploration of the abstract and incomprehensible: it charts the longest route around the earth that a courageous traveler could actually venture. How did this project originate and what was involved?

MJM: *The Great Circuit Project* originated as a conceptual query more than a project with any utilitarian aspirations. The project attempted to discover the longest possible straight-line route that someone could conceivably use to circumnavigate the earth, beginning and ending in the same place. To do this, one has to consider the millions of minute, up-and-down shifts in elevation and topography, just as one might if they were walking. After researching the problem for two years, I commissioned a team that developed a complex computational program to test 129,601 possible circles around the earth, each containing

over 10,000 data points. After testing a total of 1.2 billion points, the longest route around the earth appeared.

In this project I tried to come to terms with something that's generally taken for granted: the surface we walk and live on. During this interview we've been talking about people who risked getting to the physical or perceivable limits of things. I think *The Great Circuit Project* is really couched in this tradition. It simply, and I hope elegantly, identifies a global limit and in the process demarks the most difficult, strenuous journey one could take.

CC: The idea of literally following the path that *The Great Circuit* maps around the globe and enduring such strenuous physical and mental feats fills me with wonder, excitement, and fear. By surviving this journey one might feel truly alive. In thinking about this project, I can't help but ponder your ongoing *Rainbow Experiments*, which is a series of temporary events in which you employ holographic stickers, water, and sunlight to create rainbows, wherever and whenever. There is a shared beauty, mystery, and ethereality between these two projects and *The Possibility of Men and the River Shallows*. Are these regular binders in your work?

MJM: They are definitely ideas to which I aspire, but it's difficult to say that beauty, mystery, and ethereality are binders in my work. I see them more as the end results of getting everything right; of getting all the things that I can control right. There are ten thousand things I can adjust, manipulate, and suggest, and if I'm lucky to figure out the proper mixture of dissonance and harmony, a project might point toward something as unfixed and distant as beauty, mystery, or ethereality. The ideas you mentioned all seem to stem from beauty, which really speaks about its centrality for me. A moment with beauty is an extreme experience, it is something without scale, something almost too wild to conceive or witness. The moment is unsettling. It rises up and flows over the borders of what's available and comfortable. Each time we experience it, it forces us to re-measure things, to invent a new gauge that reorganizes our spaces. Makers entering into this pact with beauty are really agreeing to navigate the perimeters of experience and to try, however feebly, to articulate them. Hopefully, when this moment ends we're nudged to re-examine the stuff around us and to be as sensitive and specific as we can in hopes that we might experience it again.

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