http://www.minusspace.com/2009/04/bibi-calderaro's-present-an-interview-with-the-artist-by-karen-schifano/ (for full view with images)

Bibi Calderaro's PRESENT, An Interview with the Artist by Karen Schifano, 2009

For three hours, twice a week, artist Bibi Calderaro "shows up for work" at a white formica-top desk in the café at P.S.1, in an ongoing performance of her work, PRESENT, part of the Minus Space exhibit (which has been extended through May 4). On the desk are a manual typewriter, a stack of well-worn books, and an "out-box" where Bibi places typewritten thoughts that are her responses to readings. These pages of poetic insights and musings are offered to the public to carry away with them. On the wall behind the desk is a dark spiral shape on paper, which upon closer view is a list of book titles, books that Bibi is slowly working her way through, and sharing with her audience at P.S.1. An intimidating but intriguing group of books, seemingly covering almost every topic you can imagine, this list, and the wonderful generosity of sharing her search with random strangers, is what inspired me to conduct an online interview with the artist.

Karen Schifano: What is it like to be out in a public space doing your own personal search, one that normally one does in a library or at home on the laptop, and also connecting socially and intellectually with the audience at P.S.1? Do you feel self-conscious, or exposed in any way – or do you enjoy the interactions? Any anecdotes to share?

Bibi Calderaro: I have never been able to read in the silence of the library. I need a constant but low- level noise to help me concentrate in what I'm reading. The fact that there is no formal audience helps me do my thing as well. For the most part while I read the people around me are not even aware of me performing. It is only when I start typing that they realize something is taking place other than just a casual reader by the corner, or when they go around the room looking at the art in the show that they see the out-box with my typed thoughts and might stop to ask what I'm doing. Some of these sporadic chats are long, maybe hours. A few weeks ago a lovely person stopped by for a brief time in the beginning and then came back after seeing the rest of the shows at P.S.1, pulled a chair by my side and chatted with me for more than an hour. Another time, just as I was getting ready to leave and had my last thought of the day out, a woman who had been sitting across from my desk approached me and showed happiness and gratitude for the fact that I was giving out a written piece. Then her friend got closer and upon reading my thought over her shoulder exclaimed "Oh but that's just you!"
Throughout the development of this piece my writing has changed quite a bit. In the beginning I might have used some pronouns, where after a few weeks at work I erased them from my vocabulary almost completely, trying to condense a thought to its most abstract yet open possibilities. It is quite amazing to me that such a thought could touch someone's core self so that that person recognizes herself in it.

schifano-calderaro-2

KS: So what led you to the idea for this performance?

BC: I search for and aim at a more direct experience with art, both from within myself and from the viewer/spectator. I think performance was a logical development within my overall art practice. Certain aspects of my last and only performance were not fulfilling though. Although what attracts me is the impermanence of performance, I was unsatisfied with the relationship with space and context that it lacked. Having been invited to participate in the Minus Space show, it was clear to me that performance was the way to go.
One early morning I walked past a coffee-place and saw a person reading and writing by the window, no laptop involved. I immediately fell in love with the idea of going back to reading and writing without the help of an electronic device, going back to books and handwriting or typing mechanically and leaving a physical trace of the process involved in thinking, writing, languaging.

KS: Would you explore your title a bit? I remember you saying that there are three different ways of reading the word “Present”. Could you elaborate on this? In your accompanying statement for the piece, you mention Walter Benjamin’s concept of history. Can you explain what that is, and discuss why it’s important to you at this time to delve into the area of study that you’re sharing with the audience at P.S.1?

BC: I just recently thought of the possibility of ideas being able to wilt. If this is so, it is because in some level they are alive, they are born or aborted, they are nurtured or not, they die instantly or survive our many doubts, they rot if you keep them for too long without transforming them into something else (a text, a materiality, a gesture of love, an action), also if one is to tautologize them into the obvious they can refuse to go beyond the immediate. They also wilt if kept for too long with the same water —is our brain also 70% fluids? I wonder about these things as I think of the title for the action I am conducting at P.S.1: Present.
It is in the present as the elusiveness of the duration of each moment that one may rescue a thought or let it go. I wonder how an author who writes novels experiences this, and how it was in times of Cervantes, when it was all handwritten, no aids of typewriter or computers. I also delve into the possibility of the discarded thought as materiality.
To present is to allow for the thought to go forward, to give some air and light, some watering, some extra thought, to the first intuition. It also immediately involves the other, since one would not talk about presenting a thought to oneself, but rather giving it some sort of legible shape so that another subjectivity may grasp some kind of meaning from it.
It is also in the present as a gift that I think of both when the thought is brought about in whichever organ it is that it first develops, and as the thoughts being put out there as text, as a piece of work on a humble piece of paper, as part of a fluid poem with no end in sight and that is already around the world in the hands of so many people who have taken them.
Present is also a present in the form of time that enables the thoughts of others to present themselves to me.
It would be wonderful if we could live as human beings in this entangled

world of words with only the present in mind. It has been and still is the practice of many to stay in touch with the present, to allow only the present to be present, and not have pre-sent thoughts about the future, near or far. But we have memories and thus we have traditions which we are free (are we really?) to follow or not. And so we have a history, a heavily loaded history with many, many words. Some of which have been set in stone, some others just on paper, and now in cyberspace. Throughout the millennia we have managed to follow some of these thoughts, interpreting and re-interpreting them with no end.
One of my aims in Present is to search for the moments in which an author has allowed his/her subjectivity —consciously or unconsciously, whether we think that's a possibility or not— to take over their thoughts, their main thesis. The image of the snowball comes to mind, as a small thought that is translated into words, then rolls onto another subjectivity where it catches on and becomes bigger and bigger, covered by more and more snow-words. Yet this new bigger snowball is not the original snow-word, it is just there, covering it. As the snowball rolls throughout history, one can only imagine the original snow-words being kept small and nuclear within the core of huge traditional snowballs. Only in an avalanche is it possible for the original snow-words to become free of the weight they carry around as interpretations have piled upon them in snowflake shapes. This is what interests me of Benjamin's idea of History. The way I understand him is there is always some violence involved in the uncovering of thoughts to their original. Yet, since we are not free from interpretation, we must build yet another context for these original words. It is in this process that we may find the only possibility for redemption as we take possession of one's past. According to Benjamin we can only possess our past if we can quote it.



One of the many layers of Present is where I read texts in order to find quotes that I will use in a future performance. I have always felt an attraction for the meaning of words, their epistemological value, if we may put it that way. It has always amazed me usually how close words are to their original meaning, yet how covered this meaning is sometimes and how this drifting occurred.
When I choose the texts for the performance I am aware of the resonance each discipline may have with a present situation —i.e. economic, social, personal. I am after the original thought, the originating word for the snowballed theories that lead our lives today, in 2009, as a humanity that inhabits one world and who could have, by now, learnt to live together in peace, harmony and with respect for each other as individuals in difference. Could this be called inter-subjectivity —and can it replace globalization?

KS: Is this "snow-word thought", the original thought, also the place where the author allows his/her subjectivity to take over their ideas? How do you tell the difference between the original thought/idea, and all of the layers that have accrued over time? Are you also thinking about the myths we live by, and how our own subjectivities would influence how we receive these ideas?
Years ago I read some of the French poststructuralist philosophers and I

remember the notion that language seems to be structured by the particular time in which is it being used, and so thought is almost held captive by its context. One would have to analyze the syntax of the language itself to extricate the meanings behind the words. And we in the present, in our own particular historical context, would never entirely understand. (I may have this confused though). Anyway what kinds of ideas/books are you following – I know that the list is part of the documentation for the performance – what areas are of interest to you in this search?

BC: Areas of interest: how thought is formed, how theories are formed, how both of these are engrained or not in culture and vice-versa, what role does language play in this process, the possibilities and conditions for communication. As well, how do we as societies construct behaviors that lead to responsibility, civility, free individuals (do we?); what are the limits of individuality and what conditions are necessary for subjects to engage in inter-subjective processes, how do these extrapolate to group behavior.
Gorgias, the Greek philosopher, is claimed to have theorized in his lost work On Nature or the Non-Existent about exactly the above, saying that
1- Nothing exists;
2- Even if something exists, nothing can be known about it; and
3- Even if something can be known about it, knowledge about it can't be communicated to others.
Then again, I am still searching, curious; open to communication.
In a lecture about Kant and a re-reading of modernist art after his aesthetic theories, David Carrie, one of the panelists, ended by saying that it is usually the case that experience overthrows the system. I think this is exactly what I mean when I say that people's own subjectivities bleed into their theories, just as they must bleed into their systems of belief. I just don't know how it could be thought to be otherwise, even with the most deadpan, watertight theories. Could I prove this? Take it out of the realm of the intuitive and make it itself a theory? Not sure. I have in my list of future readings a category of biographies of certain thinkers. Yet, then again, these are all interpretations.
The other day I watched a PBS documentary titled " The Ascent of Money," where many so-called economists basically state that underlying all of the economic theories, their reasons to behave one way or the other are intuitive, have to do with their ability to read these intuitions and act accordingly than with a rational understanding of a given situation.

schifano-calderaro-61

KS: So what I wonder, then, is what do you/the theorists mean by "intuition"? What makes it up, what determines it. How are emotions interconnected with thought such that a sense of the "rightness" of an idea is arrived at. How do you separate an individual's particular psychological make-up from their sociological situation, and then the larger history. How do we figure out who to believe and why – would it be because we share similar subjective structures? I have a feeling that you're looking for universals, and maybe even a spiritual foundation to our historical meanderings: the constant parts of what we call human nature. Am I right?

BC: Well, maybe. For one thing there seem to be no constants, except for the fact that all human beings have the capability of thought and feeling. But then there is the time factor which, applied to the development of civilizations, has been called history and which as well has many different ways of being approached. So let's go word by word of your long question, and I'm not even sure I can answer or begin to unravel each of them correctly.

"Intuition"
BC: Ha! Like I can explain here centuries of thinking about it…let's give it a try, or at least highlight what's important for me, here. But in any case what we're dealing with always is knowledge and how to get at it, I guess. Kant says we cannot apprehend the world in its absolute reality, that Reason is our tool for it but that it is limited and hence there is always a Concept, an Idea, which is not reachable. Bergson, a century and a half later, comes back to it. So did many other philosophers before and after him. Bergson believes there's two ways in which an object can be known: absolutely and relatively, and that there is a method through which each mode of knowledge can be gained. The latter's method is what Bergson calls analysis, while the method of intuition belongs to the former. Intuition is an experience of sorts, which connects us to the things themselves in themselves. Bergson defined intuition as a simple, indivisible experience of sympathy through which one is moved into the inner being of an object to grasp what is unique and ineffable within it. The absolute that is grasped is always perfect in the sense that it is perfectly what it is, and infinite in the sense that it can be grasped as a whole through a simple, indivisible act of intuition, yet lends itself to boundless enumeration when analysed. The one thing it is certain one can grasp from within through sympathy is the self. Intuition begins with placing oneself within the Duration.
It seems to me that intuition is always related to a direct experience of something, to a non-rational, first-hand, empathic approach to the thing (the world, knowledge). Other people take intuition to be independent of prior experience and knowledge. I don't share this. I think it is infused with prior experience, knowledge and memory.

"A sense of the rightness of an idea"
BC: Ha ha ha. This I guess is absolutely related to the idea of truth and how it comes to relate to the communication of the idea, the thing, the world. Because the problem is there is a world out there and first we don't know how to "apprehend" it, then we don't know how to communicate our apprehension of it (remember Gorgias). Ay! It's getting complicated and I don't have a PhD in philosophy. So many philosophers by now have worked on the problem inherent in language and how it just doesn't produce/communicate truth, except maybe through poetry.
Then I think of my project Present and I could, and have been, claiming that what I am doing is writing a long poem whose connection is precisely my Duration. Other philosophers have emphasized that everything is interpretation and nothing can escape it. So really there would be no possible rightness to any of these theorists' ideas, only interpretations. How do I know whether I'm hitting at the idea the way its author intended me to? But then if all these ideas/theories are put to practical trial via their implementation in different activities, (be it physics, economics, medicine, history, philosophy, etc.) the only way we have to measure our

successes in the interpretations of the former is through the results they yield. And then we correct ourselves this way or the other, usually we go in zigzags, or in opposites, I guess because our experience tells us that if A didn't work, then B must be able to work. I mean the most I'm reading these days about the collapse of the financial world, all these theorists are saying is we haven't been able to learn from History…

"How do you separate an individual's particular psychological make-up from their sociological situation, and then the larger history?"
BC: There is a puddle of water that is an abyss in this. I'm not sure I can separate it, or cross it, although of course I could, I should, but I won't.

"How do we figure out who to believe and why…?"
BC: Ha, ha ha, hahahaha haaaaaaaa (I'm falling in the abyss now, come help me please!!?). I'm not even sure it is about believing, maybe only resonating with?
"I have a feeling that you're looking for universals, and maybe even a spiritual foundation to our historical meanderings: the constant parts of what we call human nature."
I don't think I am looking for universals, I think I am looking for the thought processes/emotional baggage that has brought us where we are, which is obviously always in flux, shifting, the process and its contents. So is my piece, in constant flux, since it is inherently impossible to pin down a moment, a thought, an experience, an interpretation that would include all the others. But for sure it has to do with the spiritual and with how to approach a development of sorts that could be called a history.

"Am I right?"
BC: Yes and no. I guess instead we're having this conversation, which is much better than a right or a wrong.
Two quotes from Sebald's Austerlitz:
"…our most powerful projects are the ones that betray in the most evident way our degree of insecurity…"
"…the growing understanding that everything is decided in movement and not in immobility…"
If words are not possible and silence isn't either, what is the exact measure of language?

Bibi Calderaro's collected writings from Present will be compiled and published in book form and sold in the bookstore at P.S.1. It should be available in the next month or so.
All photos courtesy of Marcelo Brodsky.

Books Read During PRESENT, P.S.1, October 2008 – April 2009
The Idea of Usury, B. Nelson
The Rule of Mars, edited by C. Biaggi
The world of Goods, M. Douglas and B Zaberwood
La potencia del pensamiento, G. Agamben
Evolution of the Social Contract, B. Skyrms
On Certainty, L. Wittgenstein
Un Coup de Des Jamais N'Abolira le Hasard, Mallarmé
Le Bruissement de la Langue, R. Barthes

Teoría poética y estética, P. Valéry
The Gift, Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property, L. Hyde
On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Ethics and Politics, C. E. Scott
Transcending Capitalism, H. Brick
Lujo y Capitalismo, W. Sombart
The Origins of the Economy, F. Pryor
How to do Things with Words, J.L. Austin
Endgame, S. Beckett
A Short History of Ethics, A. MacIntyre
La filosofía moral contemporánea, W. H. Hudson
Agua Viva, C. Lispector
Capital Profits and Prices, D. Hausman
Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason, J. Copjec
Citizen Thoreau, H.D. Thoreau
Our Immoral Soul, N. Bonder
Profit Over People, N. Chomsky
La filosofía actual – Pensar sin certezas, D. Scavino
Handbook of Inaesthetics, A. Badiou
Gorgias, Plato
Being and Event, A. Badiou
On the Name, J. Derrida
The Shorter Socratic Writings, Xenophon
Wittgenstein and the Problem of other Minds, H. Morick
Hot Thought, Thagard
A Derrida Dictionary, N. Lucy
Wittgenstein: a Life, B. McGuiness
World and Life as One, M. Stokhof
Key Writings, L. Irigaray
Spinoza and Other Heretics, Yovel
Dialogues, Jakobson + Pomorska
The Impossible Question, J. Krishnamurti
The Mystery of Capital, H. de Soto
Labyrinth, Wilson
Exploring Complexity, Nicolis and I. Prigogine
Order out of Chaos, I. Prigogine and Stengers
Fear. The History of a Political Idea, C. Robin
The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, T. Kuhn
Labyrinth of Time, K. Penderecky
The Question of Value, J. Hans
Nine Chains to the Moon, B. Fuller
Our Knowledge of the Growth of Knowledge, P. Muna
And it Came to Pass, Not to Stay, B. Fuller
Identity and Reality, E. Meyerson
I Seem to be a Verb, B. Fuller
The Theory of Absence, P. Fuery
- See more at:
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