

Edwards + Johann: "Unfettered play in search of uncharted insights"¹

Her face coated in a thick, even coat of white paint, one half of the Christchurch-based duo Edwards + Johann, German-born Ina Johann looks out at the viewer with one eye, while commanding the missing ocular and nose space is a portion of Victoria Edward's face peering out (*Ausschnitte...I only saw parts of it # 6*, lightjet print, 2008). Although two fingers holding up the photograph in front and a portion of the world beyond are visible the image registers a complex visual and conceptual duality that speaks of the merging, integration and pushing beyond individual parameters to forge a new collaborative language, and space of dialogue, sharing and creativity. This is further enunciated in another photographic print where one half of each practitioner's face meets the other in near perfect symmetry, a viewing device or mask formed by a hand of each over one eye (*French Bay* 2008). Such works, whilst not dominant in terms of area of focus or media, attest to the degree of self-reflexivity of their practice and evince key characteristics of tearing apart and piecing back together (figuratively speaking) and layering where each accumulation holds a tone, an echo, a surrogate dimension.

Layering as a guiding conceptual force is particularly relevant in the case of Edwards + Johann given that their dual practice springs from a productive intersection marked by the intergenerational and cross-culturalism. Differences such as these are countered by similarities in other areas which produce a fertile ground based on ludic play, experimentation and open ended communication.

Becoming something of a buzz word, 'ludic' play or "...a space in between...a part of and apart from the social world"² where people "let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and encounters they find there"³ is nonetheless a valuable term, one that is particularly apt in relation to Edwards + Johann, and present to varying degrees in other female collaborator duos Robbinschilds (US) and Raised by Wolves (NZ)⁴.

The role of play in relation to art making also has a long history with philosophers and theorists from Plato to Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Walter Benjamin having written on its importance, and with Derrida who states that play opens the world up again as a means for contesting power⁵. It was this aspect that the Situationist Internationals promulgated in the heady days of Paris, 1968 as a key aspect of personal and social revolution, pre-empted in certain ways by Dada and Surrealist artists, and more or less contemporaneous with Fluxus and is now evident in many contemporary offshoots.

Play gets to the heart of Edwards + Johann's practice, it is the foundational ground and conceptual space; an enabler, generative. From this act springs a privileging of process and experimentation over any predetermined or 'finished' and final product and opens up their practice to include a performative aspect, theatre, drawing, photography, the body, moving image and installation. Such emphasis on process and interdisciplinarity sets the scene for activating two key conceptual themes of being and becoming, and enabling multiple searches for the gaps where the other can appear. The 'other' in this instance refers to the unknown or that which they might discover in the process of guided play where certain interests drive their collaborative practice forward. A parallel of productive indeterminacy can be observed in the work of one-time collaborators Marina Abramovic and Ulay who through an acknowledgment of the dual dynamic formed a collective being called 'the other'.⁶ Or as Allen Bukoff and Robert Grisen of Midwest Fluxus (began in 1980) elegantly put it: "unfettered play in search of uncharted insights".⁷

For all the freeform play, Edwards + Johann's practice is nonetheless located, site responsive, making material a key trajectory of Dutch artist/architect Constant Nieuwenhuy regarding ludic play and environment or stage where the play ensues: "[ludic play] has the aim of liberating people's ludic nature and lending it spatial form".⁸ Nieuwenhuy's comment lends itself to describe a closely related practice; a type of psychogeography where participants explore, collect data or 'détourn'⁹ within an identified environment with the aim of elucidating, re-routing and reformulating it (or themselves) to reveal new stories and possibilities. Whilst more typically associated with the throng and pressures of the urban environment, Edwards + Johann's frequent responses to their surrounding environ of semi-rural Banks Peninsula, Christchurch is a vital call to re-evaluate the local, concerned as they are, in part, with working with the histories of the surrounding land and sea.

Fishing in a Bathub: Tormenting Luxury (2007-08) is an evocatively titled four chapter video installation set variously in natural and human-made environments on Banks Peninsula and along the North Canterbury coastline. Deploying a mobility of imagination and play Edwards + Johann don elaborate and alternating costumes, employ minimal props, understated sonic punctuations and wilfully disrupted time to engage the unknown within the parameters of set zones.

In chapters of varying lengths the two are depicted actualising an awareness of space, spatiality, surface and presence whether it be in the act of idiosyncratic tying and weaving of filament-thin black cord to pockmarked walls (Chapter 1) or circling on top of and within the walls of a coastal defence battery site at Godley Head, Banks Peninsula and sweeping with broom and rake in an arbitrary manner

(Chapter 2). Gestures of accumulation feature heavily in Chapter 4 in which the protagonists create structures by piling fallen branches and driftwood. While sounding deceptively simple on paper, Edwards + Johann's actions are considerably more complex with the work operating in the first instance as an exploration in flesh and blood and in the second as filmic art or moving image. It is far from a record of a performance.

The initial actions are marked by a methodology involving the germination of ideas, development of costumes, make-up and props, and by repeat visits to the chosen site. From the visual outset it is the costumes and props perhaps more immediately than the actions themselves that signal a type of precursory otherness and otherworldliness. Finding a home in the fertile sartorial fabric somewhere between haute couture, safari, glamour and Jane Campion's film *The Piano* (Ada), Edwards + Johann's construction of character crosses borders, eras and styles that, when yoked with the filmic non-linearity, underscores an intriguing multiplicity of potential and a dream-scape quality.

These actions are edited and reworked in such a way that further distances any association with the mundane. Imagery is fleeting, multi-layered, fragmented and subject to repetition, erasure and accretion. As one collaborator appears another recedes. Gestures are light, ephemeral seeming; movement is primarily languid and outside of both narrative and time, the result of jump cuts, superimposition and slowed down speed. Generally speaking Edwards + Johann perform a type of survey or psychogeographic mapping, using their bodies, and actions both simple and involved, to interact with particular spaces. In this there is more than a hint of Edwards' interest in exploring role play and social conventions and Johann's preoccupation with navigation and coding and decoding in an attempt to reach another level of familiarity in her adopted country. Being and becoming, together.

A recent work exemplifies individual yet mutually compatible perspectives on being/becoming and relationship to the land, *Looking at – The View*, LED print, 2008-09¹⁰: Johann faces towards the viewer framed by the land, a mountain at her back while Edwards the long-time 'islander', face obscured looks out to the sea, to what lies beyond.

Collaborators since 2004, Edwards + Johann are full-time arts practitioners who work between individual and collaborative practices. Victoria Edwards was awarded her Doctorate in Fine Arts in 2006 and has exhibited extensively and worked as an arts educator since the 1970's. Ina Johann has a history of collaborating with a variety of practitioners from artists to writers/poets and musicians and has exhibited and lectured consistently and to acclaim in both Germany and New Zealand. *Fishing in a Bathub: Tormenting Luxury* will be shown at Auckland's MIC Toi Rerehiko Gallery in May 2009.

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¹ Allen Burkoff and Robert Gisen of Midwest Fluxus (began in 1980), <http://www.fluxus.org/> (4.03.2009).

² http://www.geisteswissenschaften.fuberlin.de/en/v/interart/veranstaltungen/oeffentlich/tagungen/spielformendesselbst_cfp.html (11.02.2009)

³ Knabb, Ken, ed. *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1995. p 50.

⁴ Although both robbinschild and Raised by Wolves are more explicitly performance oriented.

⁵ Makaryk, Irene Rima. *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993, pp 65-67.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marina_Abramovi%C4%87 (3.03.2009)

⁷ <http://www.fluxus.org/> (4.03.2009).

⁸ Borres, Fredrich von. *Space Time Play Computer Games, Architecture and Urbanism: the Next Level*, Basel: Birkhauser, 2007, p 218.

⁹ 'détourn' as in 'to détourn' from the French 'détournement'. Conceptualised by the Situationist Internationals as the reconfiguration of an everyday or art object so as to offer a new meaning, often of an insurrectionary nature.

¹⁰This work won the CoCA Margaret Stoddart Award 2009.