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Screen Doors on Submarines

Dave McKenzie in conversation with Ryan Inouye

Ryan Inouye: The last time we spoke, you mentioned that your work emerges out of failures you perceive in everyday life. Perhaps we can pick up where we left off. Can you elaborate?

Dave McKenzie: I think a concrete example is probably a good place to start. While crossing the street one afternoon, I was almost hit by a car that was making a right hand turn. This is one of those common and shared experiences that so many of us have, but I began to obsess about the driver and the fact that he or she may never know how they affected me. That ignorance combined with the fact that I had the right of way (I suppose this allowed me to claim some moral superiority) turned into a desire to act. Without knowing the form, I had resolved to try and make a work out of the experience.

About an hour or so later, though, another routine event occurred. I jaywalked in front of an oncoming vehicle. Because of the earlier incident, and my desire to make a work out of it, I was able to assess my current action in a way that I hadn't before. Instead of making a work that only dealt with indignation, I made a work that spoke to both indignation and regret. The work is more honest, because it addresses both my roles on that day.

In Open Letters (2006) one letter is written to the driver who almost drove into me and the other letter is to the driver I jaywalked in front of. When I have shown this work, people always want to talk to me about the time they were hit or almost hit. I have yet to meet someone with a story about the time(s) they jaywalked in front of a car. For me it is important to address this lack of vision on my part.

RI: A few of your projects have engaged the concept of the public figure. In We Shall Overcome (2004), you walked the streets of Harlem wearing a caricature-like mask of Bill Clinton. What are you exploring in this work and what do you think is at stake?

DM: We Shall Overcome was a direct result of a newspaper article entitled, Mr. Clinton, Your Harlem Neighbors Need to See You More Often, and the fact that I was in residence at the Studio Museum on 125th Street in Harlem. On an almost formal basis, the work made a lot of sense. As a temporary resident of Harlem, I attempted to fill the void the former president had created by walking around in costume.

The question of Bill Clinton as a figure in the black community has always been a thing on the periphery, and at the same time, the issue that I find most interesting. There is a joke about him being the first black president, but like most social jokes, it reveals a broad set of social and historical truths that can also be concealed in the laughter. Why Clinton was missed in the beginning is a larger question than the work itself can address, and yet, I felt that a black man walking around as a white president was a joke that could be unraveled as well.

Recently, I performed the work again as part of Performa 07, and I was struck by how different it was. It was like Clinton never existed; people barely even noticed me. Maybe this has to do with currently having a very serious black presidential candidate, or maybe hearing the same joke over and over again isn't all that funny.

RI: The human body figures prominently in your work, but often its presence only seems physical, like a costume, a static portrait at best. Can you speak to the relationship between the body and your practice? I wonder if there are any artists or academics that have informed your thinking on the subject?

DM: Any discussion of the human body is always complicated by the way we historicize and politicize one another and ourselves, but what I think I can speak to is the insertion of a figure into the work. The figure is present in almost all of my work. So even though we may talk about a body as it relates to a work like Self-Portrait Piñata (2002) this body or presence is equally there in a work like I'll Be There (2007); both are portraits although I would contend they are not really portraits of me.

In school I was really inspired by the work of artists like Marina Abramovic and Vito Acconci. Discovering a piece like Acconci's Trademarks (1970), while studying printmaking as an undergraduate was an education in itself. Even though these works were an early influence on me, it really has given way to other understandings of what we term "the body". The work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres is a

perfect example. Even when I am confronted with two clocks on the wall or a pile of candy on the floor, I am able to see people as more than material and politics. I think my work tries to move between these two models. So We Shall Overcome is no more about the body than the spinning chair video that will be in the show.

RI: In your exhibition at REDCAT, there is a series of General Electric refrigerator boxes. One stands upright, another is tipped onto its side, and the third is flattened out on the floor. An 80's style boom box plays Barack Obama's now famous speech entitled "The Audacity of Hope", which he delivered at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Together, the flattened refrigerator box and stereo possess a certain nostalgia, but there is also a presentness about the work. How does the concept of time play out in your work?

DM: When I was growing up in suburbia, one of the sites that we would activate was the nighttime parking lot. Some lots were more suitable than others with the classification centered around skateboarding and what each site could provide- such as speed bumps, trashcans, rails, etc. All of this action took place under these wonderful lights, and from afar the scene looked like a small stadium or arena. In my memory, there was this split between the day use and night use of these spaces. At night we continued to use the lots but for reasons that had little or no relationship to the local businesses, and our actions were ones that the shopkeepers and others would probably frown upon. It was common to find yourself alone in the space, and in a sense, responsible for giving it new meaning. I think this sense of private, communal, and broadly public spaces overlapping is what interests me most.

The flattened refrigerator box becomes a site, but it isn't clear what actions will take place. It's reminiscent of the d.i.y. dance floors that break-dancers make, but at the same time, the audio that will accompany the "dance floor" is not necessarily meant for dancing, and certainly not break dancing. In the show, we can see the boxes undergoing a metamorphosis-like ice melting. Here, the box is implied-visible as a new object, empty, and flattened out. Each state has something unique to it.

RI: I know that you regularly tune in to Ira Glass's weekly radio show, This American Life about "mostly true stories of everyday people, though not always," so the website reads. I've always thought of the show as an alternative to the daily news, and perhaps, another way of staying socially and politically engaged. Can you discuss your interest in this program in relation to your work entitled Yesterday's Newspaper (2007)?

DM: This is a really interesting question, because I see the format of This American Life more related to my practice as a whole than to Yesterday's Newspaper, specifically. Each week, This American Life picks a theme and then broadcasts three or four stories related to that theme. The stories that they air are also often re-broadcast under different themes. This re-labeling has recently become an essential part of my practice, as I believe that much of my work has already changed in terms of its meaning. Part of my responsibility as an artist is to acknowledge the other meanings and deal with them instead of pretending that what I have made is both immutable and inplacable.

Yesterday's Newspaper tries to address some of this tension through its structure and perhaps more importantly through the recognition of the date on the paper and the viewer's familiarity with the headlines. In a sense the work allows me to become a viewer as well, and I think it is this emphasis on the viewer—as opposed to the object—that I understand as one alternative to something like the daily news.

RI: What has compelled you to "re-label" your past work instead of pushing ahead with new projects? Can you elaborate on this concept of re-labeling and discuss how it has informed your installation at REDCAT?

DM: "Pushing ahead with new projects," I think, is the right phrase, because it really is a question of progress as evidenced in the new. It's like Tide constantly proclaiming itself to be "new," and by extension, more relevant and useful. If I could put it in larger terms, I would link it to the claim some make about our current occupation in Iraq. For these people, we shouldn't talk about how we got into this situation (old news); instead we should only acknowledge the fact that we are in it (news). The only important question left in that dynamic is what we do next (progress). I think it is possible to simultaneously contemplate all these tenses; clearly, I am not against moving forward, but I am trying to

avoid production. Production tends to eliminate thought, and by re-labeling and re-visiting my work, I extend the practice of thinking. Works in this system are rarely finished.

As I worked on the show for REDCAT, I realized that the new work in the exhibition needed to talk to some of the work that came before it. Without this conversation, I worried that the work might be inscrutable. So, I pulled in pieces like Edward and Me (2000), although now heavily edited, because it has a history and because its meaning could be expanded by its inclusion in this exhibition. I view it as double sided, because the REDCAT show is closer to a vision I have and a work like Edward and Me can hopefully be more than me simply spazzing out in front of a convenience store.

RI: You mentioned that the video of the spinning NBC news anchor chair served as a starting point for your thinking about this current exhibition. There's a blank green screen behind the chair, and the news anchor is conspicuously absent. There's movement here, but it's cyclical, repetitive. Rather than addressing the particulars of certain people or events, the work is profound and poetic in its seeking to capture and contemplate a broader feeling or milieu. How did this work come about?

DM: It's unusual for me to start with an image that I want to see and then try and construct that image, but this is exactly how the spinning chair video began. I am probably not at the point where I can describe the work or my relationship to it, but I think it has something to do with our belief (and disillusionment) in an institution like the media as well as the fact that the media has to deliver us to a product.

RI: Whereas Edward and Me explores the limitations of words using a physical and performative vocabulary, this current exhibition appears to examine the inadequacies of language on its own terms. Can you talk about this tension here that seems to be driving this recent body of work?

DM: When I'm on an airplane, I sometimes can't allow myself to actively watch the in-flight movie, but my attention is always drawn in intervals towards the screen. Even if I don't plug in the headphones, I end up watching a good portion of the movie. What's interesting, however, is how much the narrative and the filmmaker's intentions come through. It's somewhat surprising, because we put so much emphasis on the dialogue and the musical score as driving forces behind a film. I think these movies speak anyway, because they are often conventionally scripted, paced, and shot, but it's also because of the way bodies and images tell stories both inside the film and inside the viewer. When I made Edward and Me, I was definitely running from the act of speaking. At that time I simply wanted to mute the voice.

Looking back, it wasn't because I didn't believe in words, but because I lacked the words to say what needed to be said. Now I think I am looking at language in more vernacular incarnations. I am interested in how texts can be both meaningful and meaningless, both open and closed, both timely and timeless.

One of the sources for the installation at REDCAT is a photograph of a derelict building with STOP THE BOMBING graffitied on it. The image is an abstraction. It isn't clear whether the bombing refers to the place the photograph was taken or another place entirely. We might be able to date the image with some certainty—yet a similar photograph with the same text could be easily taken today. The image/text is both of the past and of the present as well, as I am sure many do, with the statement generally, but there are no specifics to accept or reject; we end up trapped by the loop of the text and image. We are carried away, but to nowhere in particular.

For the installation at REDCAT, I wanted to work with texts/objects that are very relevant to the moment I find myself in, and at the same time, I realize that in the future, many of them will read like STOP THE BOMBING.

RI: Can you tell me about the title of your exhibition at REDCAT?

DM: At the moment I feel like I am on a submarine called America—this waning economic and military behemoth. Up down. Up down. Up down. It often makes very little sense about as much sense as a screen door on submarine.