

Melanie Gilligan in Conversation with Bettina Funcke

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Bettina Funcke: When I first met you, I couldn't tell if you were a writer, a critic or an artist. Your concerns seemed to be based on a philosophical formation and you had mentioned an experience of script writing. Then I saw your performance of *The Miner's Object* at Columbia University, and I still wasn't sure if you are a writer, an artist or a critic. Of course, by now it has become clear that you are an artist, an artist who is challenging artistic definitions and pushing at the limits of art discourse. Tell me a bit about how – and why – you are creating connections between these different disciplines.

Melanie Gilligan: Well, thank you, that's a nice complement. It's not unusual to work as writer, critic and artist all at once. Maybe it's not quite as common as it has been, especially in such a conservative climate where artists tend to stick to material production and not meddle so much in discourse, while the focus of art writing is also kept quite narrow (which is why I don't entirely identify with the job of the art critic today). The performance you saw was definitely influenced by my work writing film scripts and articles. An underlying theme of the piece is how a modern paradigm of knowledge communication replaced an older one that linked personal experiences to the knowledge being conveyed – i.e storytelling. I wanted to orchestrate it in a way that brought these pre-modern and contemporary modes of communication into play. What I ended up with was a combination of theatrical monologue, wherein dialogues are enacted, lecture and storytelling session, and the actress reads her script from an auto-cue; the kind that's used for public speeches.

Also thinking in terms of scenarios and dialogue is really useful to me and I find myself doing it a lot in my other work. Some of the writing I do for publications is in a murky (and perhaps slightly dodgy) terrain between fiction, artwork and polemic, and this again is partly prompted by the different types of work I do. But since the absorption of 'non-art' was always a prevalent tendency of modernism, it isn't such a surprise to bring elements of theatrical drama, fiction, philosophy and popular science into the realm of art – others already have. It's true that a couple people were unsure of how much my last project qualified as art when I first presented it, but that just made me wonder what planet they were on, or what planet I was on (since I hadn't been in New York for very long).

But, to answer your question, this recent performance was definitely an attempt to synthesise different forms that I use, but I only felt this finally worked when all the formal elements were in place, not at Columbia but in the last performance, at Greene Naftali.

BF: You are talking about a conservative climate, which we all agree we are in, since it is conservative in many ways, most of all politically, I think. But what are for you historical moments of progress or an air of radicalism in respect to the crossover of theory and art? Or do you have script-writers or movies in mind that inspire you in this particular approach to writing and directing?

MG: Well, *The Miner's Object* was indirectly inspired by the meandering and oneiric logic of Raul Ruiz's films, as well as a few literary models, which have stories within stories, such as a Kafka short story that I read when I was 13 or so, which I remembered having this structure but later realised I was mistaken and it doesn't exist, *Melmoth the Wanderer* or certain points in *Don Quixote*. I like narratives told at many removes from the original first or third person narration, so that they seem to float free from it.

Actually, *Don Quixote* is also one example of theoretical discourse imported into art that I admire – long spoken discourses on military life versus scholarship, contemporary theatre – but these two modes aren't combined with the seriousness of some more recent art/theory combinations, instead they're uncanny or absurd. This is also something I like about Musil's *Man Without Qualities* – a lot of the conversations are very complicated treatises on this or that and it can send you reeling from over-stimulation. Crossing disciplines per se is not that important to me. The appearance of factual or even theoretical language in modern literature signalled aesthetic and social changes that interest me a lot and has everything to do with the ideas considered in *The Miner's Object*. But if I had to name particular moments of cross-over that I've been thinking about lately I'm very interested in aesthetic discourse during the period around the French Revolution and the 1848 Revolution, the tensions between the bourgeois revolutions and the nascent working-class that helped bring them about, how this was represented, the way that aesthetics were put to work by the politics of the day and the new state-building that was taking place, Baudelaire's writings on art from that

period, especially caricatures as dissenting political expression. Also, the way that early avant-garde movements like Constructivism, Dada and the beginnings of Surrealism involved a lot of activity that was not exclusively visual art, dramaturgy or writing but combined these in cabaret and theatrical performances is really instructive, although, as I say this, I think of how different conditions are today and, I can imagine these movements reincarnated in depressing or disturbing forms.

BF: Your performance *The Miner's Object* was written by you, then performed by a story-teller you directed (actually, by two different story-tellers, since you were not satisfied with the first one at all), and performed three times in New York. Do you think of the piece as radically ephemeral or what kind of documentation did you plan for to make it accessible later on? Could it be exhibited or does it always have to be re-performed? Could it be collected, reproduced, or encountered in some other way, which would differ immensely from seeing the actual performance - an old performance-related question, I guess?

MG: I actually got an actress to pretend to be a storyteller for the last performance because I realised that storytellers don't want to be directed. The documentation was pretty standard: photos and video. What I wanted from the video was something that involved the viewer more than a single shot static camera, because the piece when performed live is meant to really draw you in. I haven't wanted the documentation to be exhibited, not because I believe that live performances are an inherently more immediate form but because one aspect of the work is the tension between immediacy and mediation - i.e. the conditions of modern communication, how this is mediated, how a pre-modern means of communicating knowledge has been superseded by a factual, verifiable one - and this works better live. Or at least, I think you can get it more easily this way. When I first put on the performance in a show at the Whitney Independent Study program, I played a video of a storyteller speaking directly to the camera while sitting in a chair rather than documentation of the performance for this reason. No images or video have been bought but I have made a booklet of the script and these have been given out and sold. They're of course very different, more like reading a theatrical script where you have to imagine the setting and action. I'm still not sure whether the fact that, as with most performances, it will only be more widely seen through images and video is particularly interesting.

BF: I wanted my last question to focus on the content of the script since we already talked about contextual concerns, such as historical references, writing and directing as tools, and the challenge of documenting work based on performance:

A key question of the story is the topic of perception. You are circling around general answers to why we see or respond to things the way we do and your examples for this always remain beyond a satisfying explanation: the causes for different kinds of laughter. You introduce competing answers and explanations from different disciplines, ranging from medical, that is, neurological and scientific, to political, social and cultural constructions of the experience of the world. This tension is never resolved. The audience of your performance is left with a sense of absurdity. Have you been thinking about these topics for a while and do they appear in other works?

MG: Yes, I've been thinking about similar ideas for a long time. In the performance I represent these two competing notions of how thought, feeling and subjectivity in general are constructed by two different characters within the story and further sub-characters as well. Though certain ideas come across as more sympathetic than others, I wanted the audience to receive these arguments in a fragmented form, so that the many perspectives somewhat undermine the notions of direct causality represented.

This is the first time that I've dealt with this specific subject, but another work I did, a very early video, told a narrative, a fictional and nebulous founding myth type story about how our subjectivity came to be. In both this and *The Miner's Object*, the narrative form was very important, as a structural and formal device but also as a fundamental condition of thinking about how we experience subjectivity – something that's even mentioned explicitly in *The Miner's Object*. Then a later video I did showed a knowledgeable and eccentric man (my uncle) describing the beginning of the universe and then life on earth from the development of the first cells to the mechanisms of perception in animals, finally he comes to humans that can reflexively perceive themselves – what he thinks is an expression of divine will (he's a practicing Baha'i [Melanie: can you explain quickly what that is?]). The footage of him is combined with footage of a video 'blue screen' and Caspar David Freidrich-ish wooded landscapes covered in mist. My uncle's odd and often poetic way of describing these matters gives the impression that his own idiosyncratic subjectivity by far

exceeds the straightforward biological explanations he gives for human perception. But anyway, this is quite old work. [I'm not especially into it anymore.] [I would maybe take out the last sentence – it's not strong to end on this negative, doubting note, and not necessary]