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ART PRACTICAL

## Southern Machine Exposure Project

by Southern Machine Exposure Project Contributors (Larissa Archer, Christian L. Frock, Jeanne Gerrity, Bean Gilsdorf, Glen Helfand, Renny Pritikin and Genevieve Quick)

July 18, 2012

*On June 26, the Los Angeles-based artist Colin Dickey told me that the slope on the sides of my skull indicated that I was prone to failure, which would explain why I was an art writer and not an artist. It is safe to say that I will not be endorsing any revival of phrenology Dickey may spearhead in the near future. But it also seemed rather evident that accurate readings were beside the point in SMEP 16, "Séance du Sis"; a casual approach to distinguishing between fact and fantasy paralleled the evening's atmosphere, in which people meandered from room to room to observe the various readings underway. Like each of the twenty events that were part of Southern Machine Exposure Project, a collaboration between the Bay Area- and Los Angeles-based entities and the brainchild of Courtney Fink and Mark Allen, their respective directors, this night was an invitation to be at home, if you will, with multisensory, thought-provoking, and even playful experiences of art.*

*As Glen Helfand noted about SMEP 7, "the intimacy of home did much to break down a sense of resistance to the gentle spiritual overlay" of that event. That intimacy emanated from the venues themselves, which are the residences of (many long-time) supporters of Southern Exposure. While the hosts' levels of engagement varied, from simply being present to actively participating, the overall sense of being "comfortable immediately and unencumbered by the expectations of a performance in a gallery space," as Jeanne Gerrity noted for SMEP 19, proposes an ideal for what one might hope the relationship could be between artists, art spaces, and their patrons: a reciprocal, open, and familiar one.*

*Stripped of formality, the settings also potentially could have created camaraderie between artists from the two cities, and while a couple of writers note astute pairings and a sense of overlap between practices, others didn't identify connections between the participating artists. Overall, it was hard to gauge from any individual evening what future cross-pollination may occur. But a collective review may offer a more nuanced perspective, so what follows are brief impressions from **Larissa Archer, Christian L. Frock, Jeanne Gerrity, Bean Gilsdorf, Glen Helfand, Renny Pritikin, and Genevieve Quick** on the evenings in which they participated. — PM.*



Scott Cazan, Joshua Churchill, Carmina Escobar, and Chris Kallmyer in the home of Joyce Grimm. "Closet Concerts," June 15, 2012. Courtesy of Machine Project, Los Angeles and Southern Exposure, San Francisco.

### SMEP 5: Closet Concerts with Scott Cazan (L.A.), Joshua Churchill (S.F.), Carmina Escobar (L.A.), Chris Kallmyer (L.A.)

In the home of Joyce Grimm

Attended by Christian L. Frock, June 16, 2012

"Closet Concerts" was like a mellow house party in the waning hours, with low lighting and stray bottle caps. Four artists offered unseen musical performances from behind closed doors throughout the home of Joyce Grimm. A handwritten note bid visitors to put their ears to one of the doors and knock. The note assured, "This is just between you and me," and what followed the knock were astonishing

vocals by Carmina Escobar. Behind another door, Joshua Churchill created audio alchemy as mysterious lights could be seen flashing from within and the walls vibrated: listening became multisensory. Unmarked doors diminished a visitor's interest in who was from where; the resulting mash-up was more compelling.

This jam session of simultaneously distinct performances encouraged exploration of Grimm's flat. Every door offered intrigue, but only select spaces were animated, and this ambiguity heightened an awareness of the space. Intimate domestic nuances—the art on the walls, the dishes in the kitchen—and the charged possibilities of private spaces set the stage for this experimental merging of life and art. Would it have worked in a gallery? It's doubtful. By nature, what goes on behind closed doors is most provocative at home.

**SMEP 7: Krystal Krunch (Asher Hartman & Haruko Tanaka) (L.A.) and David Wilson (S.F.)**

In the home of Scott Oliver, Hilair Chism, and Oliver Chism

Attended by Glen Helfand, June 17, 2012

This breezy Sunday afternoon was all about sincere, unhurried observation, deliberate cadences, and tapping into deeper reads of the ordinary. The double-bill began with David Wilson leading his charge of ten guests armed with drawing utensils on a stroll through the neighborhood. We walked and talked through gritty, oddly charming patches of West Oakland before sitting down at a harsh, concrete-lined interchange of freeway entrances with directional signs affixed to unlikely surfaces. There, and later at a desolate train yard, we drew the prosaic scenery: plein air in industrial zones.

Back at the house, we ate delicious pizza in the garden before Asher Hartman and Haruko Tanaka (a.k.a. Krystal Krunch) enthusiastically facilitated some grounding exercises involving color identification and meditation. This prepared us for an encounter with the house that would involve, according to the project blurb, "intuitive practices of awareness of space and spirit." We were instructed to look into the eye of a partner and compare notes about what we saw; hold a small object brought by another person and report on the vibe it imparted; and read the house by describing the energy we picked up. I was game for the first two exercises but wasn't feeling the final one and sat it out—something we were always encouraged to do. I'd call the afternoon gentle, though can't say I didn't struggle with cynical suspicions about art contexts. But while my doubts may have dampened the project's crunchy California-ness, its gentle challenge was rewarding.



**SMEP 14: Colin Dickey (L.A.), Josh Greene (S.F.), and Jason Torchinsky (L.A.)**

In the home of Maria Mortati and Mark Glusker

Attended by Genevieve Quick, June 24, 2012

In the home of Maria Mortati and Mark Glusker, SMEP 14 took participants to the edges of believable facts with the work of Colin Dickey (L.A.), Josh Greene (S.F.), and Jason Torchinsky (L.A.). While Dickey's contribution—a humorous and eclectic presentation on the life of Saint Anthony—wasn't site-specific, it nicely complemented the work by the other artists. Greene's self-guided audio tour used the Mortati and Glusker house to create an intimate picture of the homeowners' lives while guests examined a door knob, lay at the foot of their hosts' bed, and inspected Glusker's collection of vintage adding machines. In the dark and bunker-like garage, Torchinsky fervently argued

against Mercedes-Benz's assertion that Karl Benz was the inventor of the automobile. Torchinsky's lively presentation ended in the driveway, with participants learning how to escape from a locked car trunk. While chocked

full of information, each artist skillfully navigated potential viewer fatigue with their intriguing and sometime humorous presentations.



**SMEP 16: Séance du Sis with Luis Delgado-Qualtrough, Jeremiah Jenkins, Alice Shaw, and Cassie Thornton (S.F.); Ben Benjamin and Colin Dickey (L.A.)**

In the home of Jennifer Roy

Attended by Bean Gilsdorf, June 26, 2012

"Séance du Sis" presented various performative "readings" that were centered on the participants. In one corner of the packed house, Alice Shaw scanned the auras of attendees while dramatically passing her hands through the air. In the next room, Colin Dickey ran his fingers over the scalps of willing visitors and made confident phrenological pronouncements (some outrageously incorrect) about their personalities. Upstairs, Cassie Thornton's contemporary take on so-called energy work helped guests visualize their debt while, downstairs, Ben Benjamin interpreted the idiosyncrasies of patrons' handwriting samples. What made

this event so amusing was not just the loopy semi-mystical readings but also the guests' buzzing eagerness to swap notes about the readings they received and the accuracy of the predictions. I can't remember the last time I went to an art event and talked with so many strangers. The intimate setting made "Séance du Sis" feel more like a great party than an art event: loud, lively, and relaxed.

Also attended by Genevieve Quick, June 26, 2012

"Séance du Sis" featured six projects that individually addressed phrenology, cosmology, clairvoyance, tarot cards, graphology, and debt visualization. The evening's projects varied from Ben Benjamin's rather straightforward but engaging handwriting analysis to more complex inventions, such as Cassie Thornton's Debt Visualizations and Luis Delgado-Qualtrough's Loteria Cosmologica. As participants were read, others mingled about, eavesdropping, observing, and comparing results. Like an evening of parlor tricks, the evening in Jennifer Roy's Victorian home fused art with the extrasensory. While the artists and participants held various degrees of belief, everyone seemed to comply, such that the participants became actors in an evening of speculative play. Lightheartedly, the evening deployed our desires to know about ourselves—or how and what about ourselves we project onto the world.

**SMEP 18: Emily Auble and Miriam Jones (L.A.) and Torrey Cummings (S.F.)**

In the home of Charles and Heather Holt Villyard

Attended by Renny Pritikin, June 28, 2012

Like the San Francisco choreographer Joe Goode, who queered the classic Agnes de Mille—choreographed musical *Oklahoma!* in the late '80s by casting male cowgirls and female cowboys, Torrey Cummings included cross-dressing actors in staging two tableaux vivants of scenes from the classic 1939 Western, *Destry Rides Again*. The discipline, concentrated attention, and presence of the actors playing the Marlene Dietrich and James Stewart roles were spellbinding. For the full ten minutes of each tableau, none of the fifty or so people in attendance uttered a sound. It felt like a historic coming-out, if you will, for the brilliant and hilarious Cummings, who for several years has been exploring ways to update and complicate the gender constructs of the Western. Equally successful was the work of Emily Auble and Miriam Jones, who presented two short puppet-show-cum-paper-doll performances formally updated via video technology. In these, a live narrator manipulated small props on a miniature set wired for video while reading a text by the modernist poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle). The audience followed the action on a small TV monitor. When an image of Dietrich appeared among a series of Hollywood stars, the magic of a very special

# S O U T H E R N E X P O S U R E

evening was brought full circle, in which talent, innovation, and community came together, reminding one of the good old days of performance. It was the reward for being there.



## **SMEP 19: Helena Keefe (S.F.)**

In the home of Chris Sollars, 667 Shotwell

Attended by Jeanne Gerrity, June 29, 2012

Averting many potential pitfalls, Helena Keefe's dinner for twenty succeeded as a perfect melding of current Bay Area trends: a local organic feast paired with social engagement. The delicious twelve-course meal avoided relegation to a trendy restaurant experience by including activities for the diners, such as staining the purple-cabbage-dyed napkins with lemon juice and shucking fresh garbanzo beans. Keefe concocted the small dishes, served on plates handmade by the artist in collaboration with Atelier Dion, by using the immigrant stories of the participants and their ancestors for inspiration. The precedents for this type of art and food

conflation are too numerous to list, but Keefe managed to borrow the best aspects of projects like OPENrestaurant and Sunday Soup while adding her own touches, including writing the menu in a language that none of the participants could read, thus simulating the new immigrant experience in all its confusion and promise.

## **SMEP 19: Wobbly (Jon Leidecker) (S.F.) and Jason Brown (L.A.)**

In the home of Danny Gotimer, Julie Boddorff, Wiley Laufman, and Annie Fleming

Attended by Larissa Archer, June 30, 2012

On Saturday, June 30, Wobbly's aural installation complemented Jason Brown's witty lecture by juxtaposing visceral and intellectual responses to our increasing comfort with technology's escalating presence in our lives. Wobbly (a.k.a. Jon Leidecker), focusing on feedback as the "intrinsic voice of electronic music," improvised an audio set exploring the similarities between birdsong and feedback but offered no theories on why these similarities exist. Feedback doesn't sound any different or better when created deliberately than it does as a nasty fluke of a badly arranged sound system, and all the drugs in the world would not have killed the necessary number of brain cells to allow a visitor to comfortably enjoy the session. But persistence (or the sense of obligation to stay with the hosts in their home rather than leave when the going got tough) revealed that the sounds that we associate with chaos and horror are the sounds created by malfunctioning technology. No lion's roar or rolling thunder or crash of waves could sound as frightening and alienated as the hissing, churning, crackling arrhythmic mess of out-of-control machinery.

Jason Brown's witty lecture and slideshow "Cybernetics!" explored our evolving, uneasy relationship with technology. Brown used the film *Tron* to delve into our dark worry that the technology we have created will someday possess a will of its own and control us. Following the progression of our relationship with the virtual world, from fear to fascination to unquestioned acceptance, Brown concluded with a description of certain spambots that amalgamate random data into nonsensical blurbs that people enjoy and follow on Twitter. It all sounded like the end of 1984 ("He loved Big Brother"), but Brown's humor and exuberant stage presence mitigated what is—when one really thinks about it—a thoroughly depressing insight into our cultural mindset.

*The twenty events of Southern Machine Exposure Project took place in various private residences in San Francisco and Oakland from June 11 to 30, 2012. The program was organized by Southern Exposure, in San Francisco, and Machine Project, in Los Angeles.*