

# THE LONG CONVERSATION

EXHIBITION & PERFORMANCE SERIES

## CONSTANT CONVERSATIONS

by Heidi De Vries

The life of an artist is rarely an easy one. Over the last several decades some Bay Area artists, due to the experimental and ephemeral nature of their work, appear to have chosen a particularly difficult path. However, by exploring new ways to involve the audience in performative, durational, sometimes hard-to-see works of art, these artists have done nothing less than change our notion of what art itself can be.

Southern Exposure's 39th anniversary exhibition *The Long Conversation* highlights two generations of Bay Area artists. One generation was working at the moment the gallery itself was getting its start in the 1970s, when San Francisco's well-deserved reputation for experimentation made conceptual art practice an exciting (if not always lucrative) undertaking. The other generation creates art influenced by that original guard. Curators Courtney Fink, Valerie Imus, Gay Outlaw and Chris Sollars uncover multiple connections across these generations as the artists grapple with a work/life balance and the importance of finding community, all while maintaining a sense of humor. The work featured in the exhibition is by turns challenging, participatory and downright fun.

The enduring voice of long-time San Francisco resident David Ireland and his famous pronouncement, "You can't make art by making art" resonates through many of the works in the exhibition, particularly in the pieces that allude to a past action or the works that explicitly encourage the visitor to participate in an activity. Ireland's contemporary, Tom Marioni, contributes a deceptively simple drawing *Out of Body Free Hand Circle* that opens the exhibition like a strongly worded pronouncement. Marioni still actively embraces the philosophy of life-as-art that Ireland embodied in his Capp Street home. Marioni's convivial gathering *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art*, first "performed" in 1970, continues in Marioni's studio on a regular basis to this day. With *Out of Body Free Hand Circle*, Marioni's act of drawing a shape in one continuous movement remains on the wall long after the motion has ceased, a monument to the kinetic energy of human life.

Ireland's influence is also evident in Nathan Lynch's installation of 77 unfired clay "dumbballs," a shape Ireland created in cement over and over again before his death in 2009. Lynch's sculptures (which are also dedicated to

the memory of sculptor Ken Price) convey a sense of weight and delicacy at the same time. Their tactility is paradoxically both tempting and dangerous: viewers are drawn to touch them, but afraid to shatter them.

In contrast, Peter Simensky makes the call to action clear in his piece *Give Me Shelter*. He invites visitors to remove a gold thermal emergency blanket from a stack on the floor. Here the seeming weightlessness of the shimmering fabric belies the blankets' strength and functionality. Though they have the incredible ability to protect against the elements, it is the blankets' aesthetic qualities, such as the crackling sounds they make once folded and wrapped, that make them so difficult to resist.

An emphasis on interactivity also figures in Whitney Lynn's playful reconstruction of a boardwalk photo op, *Dislocation no. 001 (Connoisseur Butler at Venice Beach)*. Participants may choose the persona of a blonde bikini babe or a Speedo-clad hunk by sticking their head through the appropriate opening in a painted board, and Lynn's faithful replica even comes complete with a sign that requests visitors "respect the artist" by leaving a dollar if they take a picture. With the scene displaced into a gallery environment, the usual set of actions implied by the piece is made ambiguous -- the viewer becomes uncertain as to whether they are allowed to participate or not.

Lucas Murgida similarly addresses the conundrum created by the absent artist in *Consent*, relying on his own video image to lead visitors through a brief fetishistic exercise involving a prayer bench contraption. Inspired by the recent YouTube phenomena of ASMR "whisper" videos along with his day job at Kink.com, Murgida provides step-by-step instructions that turn a participant into a performer. At moments, the process is cast in doubt, participants begin to feel faintly ridiculous, but Murgida's calm voice ushers participants safely through to the end. Like Simensky, Murgida provides an object to take away, a small rubber ball that is an integral part of the experience and a memorable token of the elapsed event.

In addition to the remnants of actions and the participatory installations themselves, *The Long Conversation* also contains many instances of time-based work, a genre of art that has a rich history in the Bay Area. Generations of work survive only through recordings, pictures or simply through word of mouth. Contemporary practitioners continue to find new ways to explore performance and temporality. In *The Long Conversation*, video documentation of performed actions links a multi-generational trio of artists—Paul Kos, Bessma Khalaf and Jennifer Locke—who skillfully use the camera to create entrancing, durational and alternative viewing experiences.

Considered one of the originators of Bay Area Conceptualism, Kos also

mentored a number of the younger artists in the exhibition as a professor at the San Francisco Art Institute. In two short videos, *FLØRLII* and *FLØRLI IV*, he rumbles a log across the floor and marches to his own whistled version of “The Internationale,” respectively. All the while, he looks like he’s having a great time. The acoustics of the setting dictate his spontaneous actions to delightful results.

Projected on a wall very close to the Kos videos, Bessma Khalaf’s epic six-hour performance piece *Monument* stands in stark contrast to the lightheartedness of its neighbor. Khalaf’s video shows the artist sitting astride a horse carved from ice, her posture and the sculpture slowly disintegrating under an intense California sun. The camera never budes, and despite identifying with Khalaf’s discomfort, the viewer does not want to look away either, anticipating the moment of inevitable collapse.

Jennifer Locke employs a similarly mesmerizing physical component in her video installation *White/Red (Fake Blood)*, which shows an overhead view of an extended wrestling match in a pool of sticky liquid. Where Khalaf sits silent and stoic, here the labored breathing of the contestants is clearly audible, adding an immediacy only heightened by the fact that the footage is projected straight down onto a white padded surface on the floor of the gallery, at the very feet of the viewer.

Performance art meets the tech bubble (and brings humor back into the mix) in a kind of high executive drag for *Mananangoogle: The Tops*, a trio of photographs by the all-female artist collaborative Mail Order Brides/M.O.B. At a time when women in positions of power are being urged to “lean in,” the group examines current conceptions of work in the Bay Area by subversively melding aspects of their Filipina heritage with Silicon Valley culture. Their fictional company, Mananangoogle, held a live onboarding/indoctrination experience in conjunction with the exhibition, screening corporate training videos and leading team-building exercises, with a few renegade, macabre and feminist twists.

Tony Labat keeps things tongue-in-cheek in his own exploration of the workplace for *Water: Posing as Sculpture*. During an open-call “casting event” Labat recorded participants drinking from a water cooler with a second camera trained on the cooler’s decreasing water level. The traditional source of office gossip becomes a prop for the “young professional” participants, who embody

differing levels of self-awareness from shy to deadpan.

The sly humor found in the work of Labat, Mail Order Brides/M.O.B. and many other pieces in the exhibition is a unifying motif in *The Long Conversation*. In some cases the artists give aspects of their practice over to chance—or they simply surprise the viewer with unforeseen perspectives and juxtapositions. In their video *That’s My Side* artists Renée Gertler and Josh Greene enlisted two Danish actors to dramatize the process of Gertler and Greene collaborating on an exhibition. There’s very little art-world glamor as the on-screen couple tries to find time to plan amidst the distractions of everyday life. Individually, each character comes up with a brilliant idea for the show: make a video with actors playing them. “Renée” and “Josh” come to a good-natured and humorous reconciliation, and then the audience has to laugh again when they realize the video they just watched is exactly the video as described by the couple.

In Mads Lynnerup’s cheeky video *Chair Massage* the hilarity ensues from a literal reading of the title. A disembodied pair of hands soothingly kneads a sleek IKEA-esque chair, the leather creaking and groaning under the ministrations, while the monitor on which the video plays is itself resting comfortably on a pillow on the gallery floor. Michael Zheng’s more confrontational work also confounds expectations, capturing a moment from a durational action by the artist. For one day, Zheng stood in front of a framed Robert Rauschenberg piece at SFMOMA, effectively blocking the work from any other museum-goer’s view. Though perhaps not amusing to the museum staff, the action was a fitting tribute to Rauschenberg, an artist who once erased a Willem de Kooning drawing as a performative act.

In the end, *The Long Conversation* comes full circle to David Ireland’s cabinet of curiosities, resplendent in its ordinariness at one end of the gallery. Just as the cabinet is filled with objects both artful and banal, Ireland’s own house functioned as a wunderkammer; the gatherings held there are the stuff of Bay Area legend. Ireland’s contemporaries and those who have come since remain committed to making work that responds to the ever-present push/pull between life and work, external pressures and the weight of artistic lineage. In the midst of these very serious topics, the artists of *The Long Conversation* remind us it’s important to laugh along the way, to maintain a sense of levity even while challenging our collective relationship to materials, to space and time, to ourselves.

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