

An interview with Natasha Johns Messenger and Leslie Eastman

Manon Slome with Camille Beinhorn

MS Let's begin with the nature of the collaboration between Natasha and Leslie.

Is this the first time you have worked together and if not, on what other projects have you collaborated ?

LE This is the 6th collaboration that Natasha and I have worked on together. The collaboration goes back a long way in fact. We both studied at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in Melbourne, Australia, and worked with a group of teachers and fellow artists around a series of questions to do with perception and the expanded field of pictorial space especially in terms of installation art. We've asked one of the key thinkers and artists from this time, Andy Thomson, to write an essay for the show. Natasha and I have worked over 6 years on six projects that focus on the experience of the viewer as the actual site and subject of the work. The form that these collaborations take varies, ranging from the wearable video headgear to architectural interventions and commissioned outdoor environments.

NJM To be more specific, our first project was *Pointform* at Conical Gallery in Melbourne 2004. Then there was *Formless* for Experimenta Vanishing Point, a commission for the Victorian Arts Centre in 2005; *Synoptic 2006* at MIR Gallery, Melbourne in 2006; *Light / Dark* at Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts in 2008 and *Synoptic 2011* at Light-Projects, Melbourne earlier this year. It might be interesting to note here that some of the works like *Synoptic* have been modified and re-configured in additional spaces to further their ongoing development. In this way, over time the installations act like a series.

MS What was it about the other's art practices that encouraged the collaboration?

What was your collaborative process? Did you work together in the space to fuse ideas, or see how separate, existing works created a new conversation?

LE For me it was an understanding, I guess because of our shared training, of key questions about installation and the unspoken elements of process. Natasha has a wonderful approach to making that is incredibly practical whilst also drawing on the intuitive. She has an immense force of willpower, a "chutzpah", that is tremendous to be around. This is a genuine creative partnership that I really enjoy. The collaborative process helps me to do work I would not usually do, helps me move beyond the limits of my own thinking and process.

For both of us response to site is critical. The embodied experience of the space is something that I rely on to develop the work. 10 Downing Street complicates our usual process because I've only seen the space in representations. We've also decided that for this occasion we will combine solo and collaborative works synergistically which is a new approach.

NJM For me, wanting to collaborate with Leslie was born from the nature of his practice and our conversations about art. His installation work, like mine, stems from painting, not sculpture. He also shares an interest in re-presenting site as subject through phenomenological modalities. Beyond that, I simply wanted to art-jam with him to see what might come out. We always work from the space, we 'get to know' the spaces together then one of us will throw in an idea, and then other will either respond with a counter idea or add to the other's. It goes on and on like this with sketching and conversations, then 3D modeling until we both feel we're ready to start solidifying it more.

MS Your work employs space as a medium in its own right. What intrigues you about how we interpret space? What inspires you to work this way?

LE For me a stable sense of space (and time) are the founding conceits of contemporary subjectivity. We are both interested in revealing perception to be a creative act at odds with the idea that reality is a given. Space is both literal and metaphorical for us both. Space operates according to a set of principles from one perspective but, from a different perspective, is entirely paradoxical and so often overlooked as a contingent phenomenon. Exposing the space as an illusion is simply one way of revealing the interdependence of the observer and the observed. What inspires us to work this way? Drawing attention to the role the viewer plays in making the work, by extension points to connections between the viewer and their role as author of this reality which we all partake of and construct.

NJM All my installation works come out of the space in which I happen to be working, and a response to those spaces. Beyond that, the general conceptual objectives and theoretical agenda underlying my installation works has been three-fold: one, to dissolve parameters between art-object and its context by using the exhibition site as subject; two, to change the way immediate space is perceived or viewed by developing modes of representation such as real-time image capture inside optical viewing structures; and three, to create artworks that are predominantly experiential (not object based). In terms of artworld influences I guess I fit somewhere between Michael Asher and James Turrell.

MS Mirrors in your work create and fragment our perception of space and ourselves in the space, questioning what is real or imagined. The viewer only realizes there is a mirror in the space once they recognize their reflection, and the piece would function entirely differently if the viewers were not confronted with their own images. Do you see the work as having a psychological or philosophical nature? (I am reminded of Lacanian theories as well as philosophical notions of what is “real” or what is a reproduction of the real, “image”). How did you originally arrive at this idea of disguised fragmented space you have been exploring?

LE The mirror of course is both ubiquitous and profoundly mysterious. The mirror simultaneously asserts and denies its presence. As with our perceptual framework, it is at once visible and invisible. The mirror has an ‘impossibility factor’ that always fascinates me. The French director Jean Cocteau’s image of the mirror in the film *Orpheus* had a profound effect on me when I was young and a recent solo work of mine, *A History’s Shadow*, deals directly with the image of the child in the mirror.

For me the mirror is both philosophical and psychological in its many readings. The mirror is the Lacanian ground for an illusory, seemingly stable, identity but on a basic level it is the ultimate contingent image of the beholder. We have also used the mirror as an unstable two-way screen as in the work *Dark Light*. The two-way screen compounds this material creating a double reading of the real and represented.

NJM The use of mirrors was initially a part of a larger investigation of site-determined practice, however, as the works developed, and became body-scaled and more experiential they took on more phenomenological concerns. I became very interested in the space between what happens when perceptually you think you ‘know’ something to be real, only to be mistaken, then there is a conversation between your logic and what your body is experiencing. As for the philosophical or theoretical thinking behind (or in front) of these investigations, I think the work is open to psychoanalytic readings through the likes of Lacan, however when creating these works, my concerns were more philosophical in nature. The most influential text for me being Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, specifically the writings on the intertwining of consciousness and perception.

Natasha Johns-Messenger & Leslie Eastman, *Dark Light*, 2008, Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne

MS You have used architecturally scaled mirrors to bisect the gallery space in previous exhibitions, has your idea for *Pointform* developed since you last created this type of installation?

LE The bisection of the entire space is something that we were both very excited about in the *Pointform* exhibition as a genuine collaboration of our respective interests. The *Pointform* work utilized a heat stretched mirrored film that we are both really keen to work with again. The film has a fabulous double life. Again it complicates the 'impossibility factor' of the mirror. It does not quite dissolve or deny its presence, like the ground of a canvas, lens flare or pixilation, and suggests transience and change through its mesmeric quivering qualities.

NJM Only slightly, this is because since doing *Pointform* in 2004, Leslie and I have wanted to re-configure the same principle in another space. Having said that, however, at 10 Downing, there will be an additional site related sculptural device, that of 'doubling up' the existing fluorescent lights in one of the *Pointform* pieces. We see, *Pointform*, as a principle or a methodology, that can move from one space to the next.

MS How much does the specific space impact the viewer's experience? Or is it the viewers themselves who change the piece each time? Do you see this type of installation as having limitless possibilities when it comes to scale, installation and location?

LE The intention is to open up questions about the veracity and contingency of the real and to draw attention to the beholder's role in projecting a sense of permanence and stability upon it. In this sense the work is conjectural not definitive, sometimes proposing a union of subject and object and at others an infinite regress of figure and ground and self and other.

NJM It's a bit like, which came first, the chicken or the egg. Because the works are experiential, and there's no optimal way to negotiate them, the participant viewer makes their own way. Having said that, the works can be a very different experience if viewed in a group of people or going solo. The large unbroken mirrored devices used in *Pointform* have physical limitations but limitations can bring new ideas to the table too.

MS Your work involving mirrors creates a cyclic relationship between the viewer and what is being viewed. Leslie's *Camera Obscura* piece functions similarly to bridge the inside and outside and confront the viewer with two opposite experiences simultaneously. Is this duality of experience how you see your work fitting together?

LE That's right, the relationship between viewer and viewed, the techniques of the observer and observed are shared concerns. The *Camera Obscura*, of course, has been discussed in terms of a separation of viewer and viewed. We are both interested in scrutinizing these apparent demarcations or binaries behind this thinking. The simultaneity of these states is especially interesting to both of us. The mirror and the *obscura* simultaneously affirm Cartesian modeling and at the same time dismantle it. The first person experience of these works hopefully opens up questions for the viewer about experience of the real that is not at all simple.

NJM Yes, but the way I put it is...our work fits together within the relationship to site and the 'framing' of immediate space; whether it be through the lens of a *camera obscura* or the 'real time' image capture through mirrored structures.

MS Audience participation is again stressed in your *Synoptic 3* installation. What is it that the viewers/performers will experience while wearing the headgear?

LE The *Synoptic* work is a joyous participatory event in which the audience become the natural performers and subject(s) of the work. Again the 'work works' to reveal the creative role played by the beholder in generating the art work. The expectation of the queuing audience is as much the work as the experience of the two participants wearing the peculiar headgear. The entire experience again is both actual and metaphoric. *Synoptic* addresses the complexity of the art experience and representation as we experience it through simple inversion and actions. The interlocutor, the beholder, the participant is treated with the greatest respect in the *Synoptic* performance. They and their experience are the subject and object of the work.

MS Does being in a specific country inform your work in any way? Or rather, do you find cultural differences in audiences to shape the response to the work ?

NJM I'm not sure that the work changes all that much from one country to the next, but, I think it's an interesting point that Australia has so much expansive space. This must play on the psyche of the individuals who grow up there. In this way, I would say that on levels that are hard to define, mine and Leslie's relationship to space generally must have differences from someone who grew up in New York.

MS. Leslie – I have not worked with you before but could you also answer the question as to whether your work changes with the types of environment you show in?

LE Again for me site is critical. Natasha and I have a saying which is that we need to wave our arms around in a space in order to let the work arrive or appear. By this we mean that the embodied experience of a space is integral to allowing the abstract ideas we've been discussing in this interview take form or make sense on the intuitive level. Typically we have two notebooks that we wildly draw in as we have these preliminary conversations. Usually things become instantly clear after we do this for a while. There's usually an "ah-ha" moment. These things apply in my solo work as well but the process is more internal and slower.

MS Leslie – how does your academic work link in or inform your art practice?

LE Up until recently I would have said not that much. I'm a generous mentor and will share these ideas with interested students and I work to help students refine their own questions. However in the last two years I've Coordinated Light Projects, a non profit experimental space in Melbourne, Australia, with a group of artists. Light Projects has provided great opportunities for me to develop projects with my students that are about a participatory community free from commercial and institutional constraint. These projects have explored theories of mind, psychoanalysis and the social turn in art practice in ways directly linked to my own work.

MS Any comments that the address of the exhibition is one of the most famous in the world – 10 Downing Street? From a linguistic/perceptory point of view – any thoughts on inversion of space here?

LE Interestingly not overtly. Some of my solo work relates directly to my own British heritage. I've always wanted to stage a show at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich near where some of my family originated. But the residence of the British Prime minister seems a long way from my interests. But who knows what dimensions might be opened up as a result of the famous title.

NJM The thing I love most about the address 10 Downing St, New York is that firstly, you do a double-take because of the UK's Prime Minister's house but it's the way the address works in New York. The way I understand it, every building on the block of 10 Downing St. including 6th Ave, is called 10 Downing St. It's quite absurd, in a good way. A strange associative thought

comes to mind in relation to what is real and what is virtual inside the installation structures. Is that viewer real? Or is it this one? Is this 10 Downing St, or is that?

MS Anything else you would like to add?

NJM Thanks to No Longer Empty and Stonehenge for making these works possible!

LE My thoughts exactly!