



Memory and Balance: An Introduction to the installation – *Psycho Organisms*

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A striking number of those who have been the most determined investigators of nature myths, like Nietzsche and Jung, have not been among the most warm-hearted enthusiasts of pluralist democracy. And even today, the most zealous friends of the earth become understandably impatient with the shuffles and scuffles, compromises and bargains of politics when the “death of nature” is said to be imminent, and the alternatives presented as a bleak choice between redemption and extinction. It is at this point, when environmental imperatives are invested with a sacred mythic quality, which is said to demand a dedication purer and more uncompromising than the habits of humanity usually supply, that memory may help to redress the balance.

(Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, Vintage Publishing, 1996, p. 18)

Regaining that balance (between nature and civilization) is achieved, according to Simon Schama, not through political will or communist dictum, but by understanding that our best source of strength and the truest generator of lasting change to re-establish equilibrium is...memory. And memory is not only subjective, it is also cultural...we know what we are taught and what we experience. Sometimes we learn these things inside art galleries. In this short introduction to the multi-disciplinary installation of artworks in various media by two contemporary Canadian artists entitled: *Psycho Organisms*, I want to describe what I perceive to be the inferences and impulses of the works. I also want to expand upon the reality of this specific cultural situation, of this first assemblage of these works and ideas of Terry Billing and Clarissa Lewis.

An installation art exhibition is indeed a unique space held only momentarily in time. This union of thought and art and construction will happen only once and only for a few weeks. Although the exhibit may be reformulated elsewhere, it will never occur exactly the same twice. The “ephemerality” heightens the experience of the show for the viewer. The very act of installation removes the viewer from “ordinary” experience, from expected responses or well-trodden pathways: it places her inside an event.

In an essay entitled *Ordinary Acts of Resistance*, from a book called: *Space, Site Intervention*, writer Ernest Larsen describes installation art this way: “It seems that

the installation aims to valorize the otherwise ephemeral subjectivity of the everyday.” (Erika Suderburg, *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p.368) And if we are to believe this description (and it does ring true for *Psycho Organisms* as for many installations I have witnessed) we must also add that these valorizations take place in a unique and unrepeatable space. I think it is the combination of these two “truths” about the installation that makes this art powerful as a generator of lasting memory.



T. Billings *Revealed Wasp Drawings*
Mixed media, 2006

C. Lewis *Augenlid, Rückseite/Eyelid, backside: Stapfen/Traipse, Schlaflos/Insomnia, Migräne mit Aura/Migraine with Aura*

When we approach works like *Reflection* and simply stand beneath the umbra of the purified, denuded and ultimately sacred tree-shape, it is quite rightly assumed that the artist is concerned with creating memory. If we then relate this concern back to Schama’s notions of memory as our strongest mental weapon in our personal battles to foment lasting change (in ourselves and our relations with nature), then this work of art succeeds where scientific statistics and media hysterics will not. It succeeds by creating focused, yet subjective (to the viewer) memories that are made more indelible by virtue of the fact that, in this special space, all of the senses are registering unique information.

Within this heightened “space” of awareness then, *Psycho Organisms* presents its themes through the manipulation of many artistic media. The exhibit presents several loose narrative themes and messages offered up for translation by the viewer that blossom out from the works themselves. Clarissa Lewis is most interested in presenting a launching pad for ideas rather than a well –defined thesis in her artwork. To expand upon these thematic “suggestions” I want to mention several “trains of thought” that came to mind as I toured the exhibition.

The American artist, Charles Simmonds created intimate “interventions” into his community in the late sixties. His work began as physical connecting of his body to the environment, to nature. With a series of tiny dwellings that he installed in ruins, vacant lots and back alleys of New York, Simmonds was re-connecting the world of art (and thus human expression) with the natural world. “Simmonds evoked the forgotten presence of the earth lying dormant beneath the city” (Howard Smagula,

Currents: Contemporary Directions in Visual Art, Prentice-Hall, 1989, p.286). In *Psycho Organisms* one can find this same will to “very quietly” assert these forgotten presences. In some senses then, these works have grown out of a movement called, “ephemeral art”. In a world so over-crammed with images, advertisements and information, these artists believe that secret, mysterious, ephemeral statements stand out and affect us more than commercial grandiosity.

Both Lewis and Billings strive for this same secret and psychological re-connection to a forgotten nature. These works are, on one level, about natural forms and organic growths invading and re-possessing the gallery space and our psychological spaces. Just as the root ball grows and branches invade the quiet reader in *Reader* (Billings), the monumental presence of the tree is encouraged here to take back its place, and its importance, in human existence. The installation seems to be protesting the erasure of memory, by re-introducing trees and wasps’ nests into “corporate” or institutional spaces. It follows then that this erasure of memory reinforces our separation from the landscape. These works may trigger a philosophical rupture in the viewer and seek to influence a subtle shift of value systems that creates a space of resistance in the natural world to the corporate and contingent.



Clarissa Lewis, REFLECTION
Installation 2009