

LEAVING THE THEATRE

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LEAVING THE THEATRE

PAUL COUILLARD

AN
INTERVIEW
WITH
PHILLIP
BARKER



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PHILLIP BARKER IS AN ARTIST WHO CREATES LARGE OUTDOOR INSTALLATION WORKS THAT COMBINE FILM PROJECTIONS WITH LIVE PERFORMANCE. PAUL COUILLARD SPOKE TO HIM ABOUT HIS WORK AND HOW HE USES FILM AS ONE ELEMENT IN CREATING VISUAL SPECTACLES.

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Paul: I'd like to start with some very general information about your background and what you've done to date.

Phillip: I came here from England when I was thirteen with my family and later I went to art college because there was nothing else I could do. My father is now a retired auto mechanic, and I think a lot of my basic understanding of structure and interest in tools and hardware came from him. I have this need to create beauty when all I know how to do is machines.

Paul: You studied at OCA?

Phillip: I studied at OCA and went to New York for my fifth year as part of the first group in the off-campus study program. I stayed for eight months. At that point I was painting—figures, landscapes, nudes in bathtubs.... I

changed completely in New York. I came back and got interested in video, sculpture and performance, but that was my last year at OCA so I went into the job market immediately.

My return coincided with the Toronto film boom of the late 1970s. I was hired as a set painter and then as a special effects technician working with tv commercials. That gave me an introduction to sculpture. It was the first hands-on experience I had with materials; before I was only painting and drawing.

I was doing my own work part-time. I worked for a year and during that time I built this thing called *Aqueous Humour* at the place where I made special effects. It was a ton and a half of water suspended inside vertical soft vinyl tubes I'd made on a machine that bonds vinyl

together. There was water and goldfish and bubbling oxygen and it was set in front of a window at YYZ at their old location on Queen St. The piece made reference to the human eye. It was a gallery with three walls and one window and the images that came through the water were inverted like what happens with the aqueous humour of the eye.

Paul: So it worked like a giant lens?

Phillip: Yes, in a way. Each plastic tube was like a separate lens; each one contained the world. That piece got me interested in doing site-specific work.

Paul: When was that?

Phillip: Around 1980. After working full-time for a year making special effects, I went to Europe with the money I'd saved and travelled around for a year and a half. I gave up visual art and became a street musician for about eight months in Paris playing the mandolin in the metro, restaurants, cafes and bars. I joined a band and travelled with them through France down to Cannes for the film festival where we played on the streets in front of

theatres line-ups. At the time I would do one thing and stop, do something else for a year and stop—first sculpture, then music. I feel like I'm putting it all together now no more excuses. I can try doing everything at once in spite of my reservations of knowing I'm not that good at everything.

A year later I was back in Europe, living in Holland and mostly doing my own work. I had an installation in Lumen Travo, a small Amsterdam gallery, with film and painting and a mechanized sculpture of a dog that moved across a wall on a track. I started *Trust a Boat* over there when I was on my last legs financially.

Trust A Boat started as an idea I had from watching windows when I was living in Amsterdam on the fifth floor of a building. Across the street were a series of apartments where people all seemed to do things at the same time, like at 11 o'clock they'd watch the news. They would all be watching the two Dutch tv channels so the rooms were all lit up with one colour or the other. It created very graphic patterns running through the building.

I was also interested in the window as a frame, the way it frames the outside against the inside. It's like your train stopping at a station, and when the train next to you starts to move you can't tell if you're moving or not. Once you take away those orientation points your imagination takes over. It frees it up. I think that's what I'm trying to do for myself, to take away certain dogmas of life that create habits that restrain imagination. I'm always looking for ways to free myself and of course hopefully other people can experience the same thing through my work.

Paul: *Trust a Boat* involved simultaneous projections from the inside of a building onto nine windows—three across and three down—that could be seen from the street. The building became like a giant screen. Mostly it was film, but there was also a performance aspect to it.

Phillip: There were nine separate ten-minute films. I had to think of a way to hold the audience while the film was being rewound. What were they going to be looking at? I toyed with the idea of silhouettes and then having the film silhouettes turn into real silhouettes—very simple stuff but it turned out to be



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quite effective when what you had thought was a film silhouette opens the window and looks out at you. I was also interested in breaking the illusion I'd created and real people on a real scale certainly does that. It gave the audience a direct contact with what they were doing on the street with this house. I mean, this house is not really full of giant goldfish.

When I did it in Holland I also found people saying things like, "It was great the way you got that police car drive by the same time the blue lights were flashing." Once you create an event everything around it becomes connected.

Paul: People don't know anymore what's planned and what's spontaneous.

Phillip: Right, so of course I started to play with that. At one site in Holland there was a welder working down the street sending out these blue flashes, so in Peterborough and Toronto I got a welder to work on an adjacent rooftop at certain points. In effect, she welded the different sections of the performance together. Things like that make you aware as an audience member that you are on the street, not in a darkened room.

Paul: You also did that by choosing a prime downtown location where there was not just a selected audience but also passers-by who didn't know what was going on who'd be drawn into it.

Phillip: I love to experience things as a passer-by.

Paul: Is that your gauge of success—looking at it as if you were a passer-by and asking whether it would intrigue you?

Phillip: I suppose I'm affected by the amount of people who see it. It makes me feel good about using public money if a lot of people get to see it. I love breaking down those art barriers and getting out of the galleries, but I guess success comes to me weeks after the event when I'm just on my own thinking about it.

Paul: I'm interested in talking about the technical aspects of *Trust A Boat*. At some points you have nine separate film images but at other points they make up

one giant image.

Phillip: The only film experience I'd had to that point was S8. My dad had a S8 camera and he used to encourage me to use it. My first idea was to put nine S8 cameras on a wooden frame with a stick and film the scenes like that. But being in a different country it's very easy to change your identity and take tremendous risks, so I just started phoning up these Dutch filmmakers whom I didn't

Paul: Yet it worked remarkably well in terms of synch, for example when the woman's giant face looks out it was very effective in creating the illusion of being a single image.

Phillip: I was always aware this was going to be a problem, so she comes from the centre up close to the top then she rests and then she goes down to the bottom and rests; there are always these rest points so the images appear to catch

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know to ask for appointments. Later on I'd find out they were the top filmmakers in the country. I'd show them this drawing of nine S8 film cameras and ask them what they thought of the idea. First someone suggested using nine 16mm cameras and I was asked how they were going to all run in sync because their motors would run at different speeds. Eventually somebody suggested taking one film and splitting it optically so I called this assistant cameraman I had heard about, Jan Wich. He became the cameraman and shot the scenes for me in 35mm with the camera on its side so it matches the vertically oriented shape of the window. That meant when it was projected all of the projectors had to lay on their sides. I knew we were going to get out-of-sync problems, so I decided to shoot all the scenes from one point of view. The camera was fixed with long dissolves from scene to scene, but no matter what I tried to do to make the film flow and mask the fact that it was getting out of sync, it was still a very obvious thing. To me it's one of the very beautiful things that happened. I liked the effect, like in the scene when you're looking down on the street and all the cars are waiting for the light to change. When it changes, they start to go and as they go faster they get more and more out of synch. A car goes through the right window and the left window and then it goes through the middle window, so you get this kind of variable but beautiful by-product.

up with each other. It was hard because I was just crossing my fingers hoping what I was doing would be right. Now I want to do more work in this format because I'm seeing things that can really make full use of this style of playing with the space.

Paul: You had nine people performing in different locations in the building. How did you get them all synched?

Phillip: The choreographer, Marianna Ebbers, had made an audio guide track that was playing in all the rooms. We had decided that at certain points the people in the house would suddenly do the same thing and then fall out of sync again the way the film did. It was very weird going inside that house. I wish I could have brought people inside, because it was so different. Outside you had these very serene images and beautiful music. Once I went inside in Toronto and through the same system that Marianna's voice was playing there was this country and western music and they were having a hoe-down. People at that point were well aware of what they were doing and were finding ways of breaking tension.

The thing I'm learning most about my work is respecting the tools I use. A lot of my resources are people and I'm learning a lot about people as the years go by. At first I was more interested in the product and now how I get there is more important. *Magnetic Fields* was full of very important creative input from everybody involved. Most people were

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artists anyway and the big task I had to set myself before starting was to sit back and let people do it, give them space to become involved.

Paul: Rather than imprinting your ideas on them it was more like you were the director who focuses them so that their talents come out.

Phillip: Yes, I provide the frame.

Paul: In *Magnetic Fields*, you created an illusion of giant living paintings several stories high. Painted images were projected onto an area of cloth the size of a building with a wooden frame around it. Behind the cloth was a scaffolding which performers used as a support for interacting with the projected images. They would appear from behind the cloth at various heights, hanging from the scaffolding or things coming out from it, like a trapeze. Taken as a whole, the images suggested a loose narrative. How was that piece developed?

Phillip: The images and the story line was mine, but a lot of the movement and the emotion came from the people working on it.

Paul: It seems like the technology in creating large visual images is a very important aspect of your work, but you also incorporate live performance. You're not just putting what you do on a movie screen somewhere. Both *Trust A Boat* and *Magnetic Fields* involve live people as part of the image.

Phillip: There's a different shape and depth than a movie screen. I'm interested in making a film, but this is much more for me because it investigates those areas in between. When you see a film you sit in a darkened room with 100 people and enter an illusion. You get lost in a story and the person next to you becomes unimportant. Being on the street heightens people's physical awareness of their involvement with the work. They have to be conscious about going along with the illusion and make a decision to get involved in its interpretation.

Paul: It's true when I saw *Trust A Boat* I became very aware of the space—the cold, the parking lot and the people around me, the passers-by. It felt like a living situation rather than a controlled environment where the whole point is to make you forget your own body, to give your body over to the eyes.

Phillip: Right.

Paul: How do you balance the technical demands of your work with the needs of the performers?

Phillip: You know the guys in the circus who spin plates? By the time they've started spinning the last plate they have to run back to the first one to keep them all spinning. I've learned to delegate to other people whom I trust. I work with a choreographer, but the choreographer is also limited to the space I can give her. I don't know what direction is, I just know that an hour before the show I'm going to say, "You know the part where we do this and that—can we get rid of that?" Or, "Could you do something different with this person?" It has frustrated people I've worked with.

Paul: I guess that's also something that separates it from a purely filmic experience for an audience. Once the post production is done a film remains constant whereas with a live performance there's always that element of uncertainty about what's going to happen that night.

Phillip: It's also separate from theatre, because there's no script. It's like continually remaking a film.

Paul: What are your pieces "about"?

Phillip: On one level it's just me playing. Without that play I never would have done it, so I'm not excusing myself at all. It's during the making and performing that I really start to understand what it's about.

There's two answers to the question. What I would like people to do through my work—and I don't know if it's me or some energy that goes through me that creates these things—is to understand it and participate in it through their imaginations. In *Trust A Boat* I'm saying, "Imagine a house full of water." And people smile and walk down the street and think, "Imagine a house full of fire," or "Imagine a house full of insects." So *Trust A Boat* is trust your imagination, I suppose.

That's one way of looking at it. In another way, it's a personal story. People who know me well say, "How could you do that, Phillip? I know what that's supposed to mean."

And *Magnetic Fields* is about the attraction you have to something. You don't want to get too close to it or it will burn you up like the sun. You want to stay within the field of attraction and

dance around it.

Paul: Tread a tightrope.

Phillip: Yes, but it's more of a happy tightrope, more of a dance. I guess it feels like a journey I'm going through, about separation from security and movement through profession and all the risks you run into when you do work. And it's about how you accomplish it, that there is a happy ending.

Paul: But you try to convey these things without words.

Phillip: Right, just music and image.

Paul: I find that refreshing given the current preoccupation with language. I find it interesting that you feel so tentative about defining your work with words when there's so much text-based work being produced in visual art and film right now.

Phillip: As soon as you start putting in words people start to close off their minds to what's there. They get lazy. People really wondered why I wanted to fill up a house with the illusion of water as I did in *Trust A Boat*. This is what irritates me and the reason I don't quite fit into the art scene—I'm not good at putting my ideas into words. I think North America reflects a lack of confidence in itself because of its lack of history, so people want everything explained.

Paul: Do you think it's different in Europe?

Phillip: Yes, but I'm not criticizing North American society. In fact I'm a product of it. I wasn't born here but I'm really Canadian. And the fact that I can do something disregarding the culture or history in Europe makes me more of an individual there when I'm working there. Dutch people just do not go around projecting huge things on buildings. They're very reserved, intellectual, culturally oriented people, but with a high regard for the poetic. I guess I'm in the middle, straddling both concepts of what art is or isn't.

Here I've found that people want to know what *Trust A Boat* is in words; they stand in front of the building and they want to read a pamphlet that tells them what they're looking at.

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