

XX, XWHY

An Artist Talk In Four Parts

(X-tracts)

[“...” denotes edited text]

The full script performed at SOMArts, SF. January, 2010.

featuring The Exmats

Donald Daedelus

Rashin Fahandej

crystal am nelson

Jeffrey Augustine Songco

...

R: Thank you all for coming

...

C: I'm Ex—as in, I used to be someone else.

J: But people call me X, like Malcolm. So I go with that.

...

J: In answer to the question, who am I? Let me quote the poet Arthur Rimbaud who in 1871 wrote: “I is someone else.”

D: And in 1988, when asked, Who are you? John Rambo in Rambo III replied: “Your worst nightmare.”

...

J: I grew up partly in the suburbs, partly in a city, [*pause*] and all of it was a jungle.

D: At the top of the food chain were the uniformed predators—the cops and the private

security forces.

R: They were followed by the hyenas and wild dogs that were generally only dangerous in packs; but packs—consisting mostly of young males—could form at any time and at a moment's notice.

C: Then there were the general pricks and thorns, the sprains and scratches of everyday life: eggs, stones and abuse thrown from passing cars; hicks moving to a different table when I sit down in a cafe; *[pause]* not being served in shops; being spat at, punched, tripped, laughed at in the street.

D: A paranoid state of being constantly ignored, and being continuously watched. *[pause]* Seeing myself as nothing; *[pause]* seeing myself only through others' eyes.

D: Back then, the best I could hope for was the kind of nail-analogy my parents would constantly pound into me,

C : —Don't lift up your head and you won't get knocked down.

J: So that's what I've done most of my life. Kept my head down. But you can't keep some things in. I had to let it out somehow, and that's why, or at least its one of many reasons why I started making art.

R: It feels good to lift my head up. I've gotten a taste for it: I don't care if there's a hammer about to knock me down.

....

C: Whereas other people seek their inner child, I was pretty young when I discovered my outer simian.

...

D: It was quite a skill, and it hadn't come easy. At home in front of the mirror, I practiced looking as non-threatening and deferential as I could.

[*pause*]

Here, [*stand up and address audience*] you can do it with me: [*D reads, J mimes*] make sure your feet are not too widely spaced, keep your arms by your sides and unclench your fists; contort your face against all instinct into a smile; open your eyes wide and crinkle the corners to look guileless and innocent. Infantilize yourself [*tilt head*]:

C: according to ape social behavior—for this is exactly what it is—behave like a submissive.

...

D: This is my first ever exhibition, and it's a really big deal for me. I never thought of myself as an artist. I just made things, I call them "drawls," and I didn't think to show them to anyone.

J: I use the monkey as an ongoing character, maybe as an alter-ego, or maybe just as a reminder. [*pause*] The monkey is named *Why*, possibly from the children's character, *Curious George*.

D: A kid asked me once, in all innocence and with his own genuine curiosity,

R: —What was it like living in trees before you came to America?

D: I was so dumbfounded by the question that my mind went blank, my throat seized up, and not a sound escaped my lips. Not only was I devolved back to an ape, but in response I also lost the power of language.

C: *Why* is a belated response. He is all those stereotypes rolled into one: the foreigner, the simpleton, the buffoon, the deviant and the lunatic, all of which are how others might already view me.

D: That view is not something under my control, but I wanted to acknowledge it, and align myself with all those others who can't escape it.

C: I want to do more than merely acknowledge it; I want to stand up and shout it out, to lift my placard up high and shake it at the heavens: I AM A MAN.

D: Let's face it. I have no desire to be a man, at least not until all can benefit from its privileges, the privileges of what it means to belong

C: —without the slightest hesitancy; [*pause*] without designated seats on the bus,

J: —without sneering faces; [*pause*] without being stopped in the street,

D: —without border fences; [*pause*] without strip searches

R: ... without a question of doubt. [*pause*] Until then, I am a foreigner,

D: and therefore a simpleton,

J: a buffoon,

C: a deviant,

R: and a lunatic.

[*all together*] I *am* an X.Man.

[*pause*]

D: Who am I kidding?

C: A foreigner, a simpleton, a buffoon, a deviant, [*make circular motion to indicate all four of you*]

J: Those are my *aspirations*. Those are *human* characteristics. I am that monkey. In the words of Senator George Allen, I am that “macaque” [*pronounce it “macaca”*], not even human.

C: How can I be an ex-man if I haven’t even attained humanity in all the ways it is recognized? [*Pause*] At least I no longer ask Why.

R: You know, there have been times when I thought I had left that monkey behind, when I thought I had escaped the zoo. But the enclosures are still there, they just look more convincingly “natural.”

C: And with the Obamas in the White House seemingly vanquished racist stereotypes—Barack as a “witch-doctor;” Michelle as an ape—crawl back out of the mud to be revealed as a constant ghosting.

[*show images*]

...

C: I function, I’m coherent; heck, I’ve even been known to be articulate;

J: I can dress myself, I might even look good [*hold out jacket lapels*] but I’m as much infected as we all are. But, mostly, you wouldn’t know. Or we prefer not to see.

[*pause*]

D: It’s not like I carry a pack of cards with me.

C: Hey you, what you doing?

D: Me officer? I'm just strolling along playing the race cards.

[*pause*]

J: As an artist,

R: —and I like to think of myself as one—

J: I make the distinction that images are not in themselves racist and are therefore not in themselves to be censored, but it is their forms and purposes of deployment that require intervention.

R: I certainly don't think that images of humans as monkeys, or vice versa, are inherently racist. But since at least Darwin, the popular notion that monkeys are at one end of the evolutionary spectrum, with human northern European males at the other, and everyone else scattered between, means that the depiction of anthropomorphized monkeys is rarely innocent or neutral.

C: But not always racist... [*show image of George W. Bush as a monkey*]

...

J: So, at the risk of being derivative, or worse, inauthentic, I want to produce images that are not “my” [*make gesture*] culture. When people talk about “my” culture, they really mean something that's from the past and exists in the present only as a curiosity for their pleasure. I want to make images that are about the culture that produces me now, or at least produces how you might see me now. [*pause*] Okay, let me be blunt: I want to make images of *your* culture. [*point to audience*]

[*pause*]

R: And at the risk of being didactic, I consciously make my draws about the culture around me, about *our* culture...

D: about race,

R: about history,

D: about language,

R: about the everyday politics of living;

D: about the social psychology that polices the boundaries of what it means to belong.

R: But I've never made draws about my "identity".

[*pause*]

C: My source materials are what I think of as a kind of "common knowledge": postcards, sayings, advertisements, fairy tales ... all the forms of popular knowing that are so integrated into our culture that their inherent violence has become almost invisible.

J: Imagine two strangers—different hues, different world-views, different abilities to trust—they step into a forest clearing and see the likes of each other for the first time: the world opens up for one, the world is about to end for the other. [*pause*] My sources stretch from that first encounter all the way through to tourism today.

[*Pause*]

C: I want to make images that are discomfiting to all. Not as an overt gesture to shock; that's too easy, and I think evades responsibility for any consequences.

R: I have to admit that I also want to generate pleasure. I want to attract the viewer; [*pause*] and I want to thank each one of you again for being here. [*point to individual in the audience*] Thank you.

C: Thank you [*point to another individual*].

J: Thank you— [*point to another individual*]. [*pause*]

...

J: I want images that are perhaps too colorful, too gaudy, too crowded, too tacky or too kitsch; images that tasteful people will find distasteful, or say nice things while secretly despising them. I want images that might be racist or sexist, or homophobic, but at the same time I don't want racists or sexists or homophobes

C: —and let's admit, this means all of us—

J: —I don't want them to feel confirmed in their views. I want to make images that might be pretty enough to look at, but that are as irritating as a rash.

D: I want to take Matisse's sources: the "primitive," the primeval, the arabesque, the spoils of conquest that flowed into Europe at the height of its colonial smugness. Images that are so much part of our history and our present that we barely give them a second thought.

J: I want to return such images to possibilities of discomfort before their taming and assimilation. I'm not creating anything new. It's an attempt to revisit something that's already part of us.

[*pause*]

R: How do we look at images that might be both funny and offensive if not as guilty pleasures or descriptions of hatred? And even if they are, how do we open them up to public dialogue?

C: And what they might mean to us as we negotiate different groupings.

[*all change seats*]

C: Is it possible to parody a racist image without perpetuating its racism? Or even to produce an anti-racist one through parody?

R: And what of sexism? Is no one going to consider that? What about those coconuts spurting milk? You're not a teenager now

[*all look at each other. Look down at scripts. Long pause, count of five*]

J: Let me tell you a story about a foreigner.

C: And after, I'll tell you a story about a lunatic.

D: I'll tell you one about a deviant.

R: And a simpleton.

J: My first ever job. I was 16, and a supermarket shelf-filler. I was fired after a week. After all these years I can remember the manager's exact words. He looked me straight in the eye and said,

D: “You’re too stupid for this job.”

J: Too stupid to fill shelves. And he was right, I didn’t know how to do the job, I didn’t understand the environment, the other people who worked there, or what was required of me. And I couldn’t do what *was* required of me, it was too alien, too numbing. I felt like a foreigner. [*pause*] And after the manager’s words, a simpleton.

D: “You’re too stupid for this job.”

R: I would stock the shelves according to colors, and make patterns, or a kind of visual disjunction, [*pause*] like this:

[*show Gabriel Orozco’s supermarket photos*]

R: Sometimes I would line up words from different products to make phrases. Things like:

J: “kidney beans” with “stone-ground flour” to read “kidney stone” [*make gestures of holding up two separate products and bringing them together to form one*]

D: —or “chicken breast” with “full-fat milk” to read... [*hold up two hands, miming clutching two products, look at each*]

R: well, you get the idea. What can I say: I was a teenager with... certain interests.

C: But the point is that I wanted to create a more interesting environment. Maybe that was the beginnings of me wanting to be an artist. No, that’s not quite correct, it was the realization that I was incapable of doing anything else *except* being an artist.

R: I wanted to change things. For a while I tried being an activist.

J: I certainly had enough anger that sometimes all I wanted to do was throw bombs.

D: But I didn't have a very good throwing arm.

J: I turned to making pictures instead. I thought of them as a kind of incitement. Maybe that made me an armchair activist.

[*pause*]

R: On TV recently, there was an Indian character who complained that he was made to sound like a Simpsons' character. But the joke was that he did sound just like that.

C: We demonstrate our awareness of the stereotype so that we can continue using it.

...

R: I always used to draw, like it was a compulsion. As a kid I was always scribbling, with a stick in sand, with food on my plate; when there was nothing to use, I traced imaginary patterns in the air with my eyes. I used to be busy for hours, making shapes, sorting colors, following where lines might take me. When I was a kid, my father seeing me so occupied, would say,

D: —There's X again, doing his useless work.

R: "Useless work." I've grown to like the idea of that, and I thank my father for it.

...

R: Let me tell you about useless work. A pencil in my hand, a piece of paper before me, I close my eyes and try to recall the faces

D: —real and imaginary

J: —human and sub-

R: —that emerge out of the darkness. When a face, or even a fragment of a face—curl of a frown—lines of tension on a forehead—flaring of nostrils—when they come into focus, I move my fist down and across the paper in rapid bursts.

J: If the paper tears I glue the scrap onto another, and continue the drawling. Sometimes the lines become so impenetrable that I can't see which ones I want. Then I stick a smaller piece of paper on top and continue. For each line I score into the paper, it feels like a thousand others are necessary to contain it, channel it; lines of force and energy.

C: For every movement a counter-movement. Action, reaction. The projection of a brow, the hollow of an eye socket, the fullness of lips, bones and muscles, each pulling and pushing in different directions.

J: I stab into the paper, scraping, repairing, gouging. The layers can become so thick, the lines of pencil so dense that it might look less like a drawling than a solid object, a sculpture.

C: I've learned that drawling, like the language of words, follows certain structures and constructions, signs and symbols, treading established paths with the occasional jolting foray into uncharted territory.

J: At first, I have a vague sense of an elusive meaning, a light in the distance, a blur on the horizon, something I want to say if only I had the language for it.

C: Sometimes I put down the beginning of a thought, and a line completes it, flowing so easily that it seems inspired.

J: Other times, nothing seems complete and I grapple with the drawling, however long it takes.

C: But the more time I spent with them, the more I felt that drawling and painting are not innocent pleasures, not generated from some inner self, but are more like a kind of dialect picked up, a little bit here, a little bit there, like a bastard Esperanto cannibalized from itself, a supposedly universal language that no one really speaks but is more of a ubiquitous gibbering.

J: And the more I thought along these lines, the less interested I felt in re-creating the world and this language and the more interested I became in taking apart how they had been put together by others.

C: So, despite all my useless work, I never properly learned how to make art;

J: —Instead, somewhere along the line, I learned that I had to start looking.

[*pause*]

D: This exhibition is called Invisible Homes.

R: The way I understand it, and why I think my drawlings might be relevant, is that home is who you are.

D: And how you exist in the world.

J: It's not a physical location, somewhere you've left behind. It's not somewhere you leave every morning and return to every night.

D: It's the conglomeration

R: —of history; pasts, presents and futures,

D: —of memory and desires,

R: —of emotions and sensations,

D: —of ideas and physicalities,

R: —of stasis and mobility,

D: —of these networks of social relations that we inadequately call a body.

...

C: We live in our bodies. Our neighborhoods are extensions, prosthetics, as it were.

D: Some bodies are more visible than others.

R: Or differently visible.

D: What I want to address in my drawls is what happens, including the violence and the desires, when different kinds of bodies bump into each other.

C: How do those histories and memories, those pasts, presents and futures,

R: —those moving locations, those ideas and physicalities,

C: —those emotions and sensations,

R: —those networks of social relations

J: How do they intersect with one another?

[pause]

C: If I can leave you with another question: what's our exit strategy?

*[stand up, weave in and out or bump into each other and find another seat; scan and pause momentarily on different faces in the audience. One at a time, stand up, turn to the side and exit]*

*End]*