

# Mark Dion

aus Artfan 7, Mai 1992

I was living at the Ymca when I first came to New York. They had some dormitories there, that were really small, it was really incredible, it was maybe two meters by three meters room, that was all you had, there was a bathroom that you shared with everybody else. I didn't have a job. I was living on a Dollar a day. A Dollar fifty. So you could buy like seven apples for a Dollar, so I would buy apples one day, oranges next day, bananas one day, incredible. It was not even remote fun, just so depressive. I used to go out with the friends I was with, we would go to Night Clubs, and we would have to stay outside the door, until they would let us in for free. we could never buy a drink, we would have to wait for someone to turn away from their drink and then take their drink, or if someone would put their drink down to go dancing we would take it.

- *You were a punk then*

- Sort of, not really. It wasn't such an aesthetic decision, like being a Punk was here. Here it was no life style decision, it was an aesthetic decision, it wasn't about how you lived but how you looked.

With German and Austrian artists, you find very few directly involved in doing political work. Or work that addresses social concerns in culture. political concerns. Why do you think that is so?

- *Because in Austria, nobody stops the young artists from thinking of themselves as artists working alone in their studios, with the notion that art comes out of their own heads alone. I noticed that in interviews everyone is talking about his work, and when I came here nobody was so explicit about his work, but talking about many more things,*

- I did a show in Venezuela with a number of American artists, and it was very controversial there, because a part of the catalogue was a group of interviews with the artists and almost none of them addressed their work specifically, they talked about gay sexuality, ecological politics, or philosophy, or history of photography, but none of them specifically addressed, these so called aesthetic issues, and this really shrieked out the people who were putting the catalogue together.

- *What's your point now?*

- I think it is very interesting, also because when I speak to artists in Germany, they do address social issues, and they do speak about politics very directly and, I think, very intelligently, but then very often, when you look at the work that they do, there is no direct reference to that material

- *But a direct reference need not necessarily be in there*

- I was almost surprised that there was almost no artist dealing with that concretely. Here I think there are almost too many.

I'm wondering if the weight of the figure of Beuys does somehow interfere with the possibility of discussing these issues, and if for example in relation to, I'm interested in doing work around the representation of nature, what that has to do with ecological struggle and changes in the dialogue of our relations and obligations to nature and somehow that's so overcoated in Germany by the Greens and by Beuys, that it seems that one could not touch that territory, without somehow so specifically addressing that figure. It seems that his ghost has scared everyone away from the territory.

- *I don't think that this is here an easy theme either*

- I don't feel so comfortable talking about the German situation I don't really know the context.

But I mean even more in relation to just art production, there are very few artists who directly engage political concerns in their work.

In a way Andrea Fraser does, Fareed, Christian Philip Müller

That seems to be a very keen appreciation of these artists. They are all very popular, they function reason-

ably well within the situation.

- *Why is their work political. I mean I say it is, but where does it come to action, like a political speech*

- I think that is because there is a politics of representation involved. But I think the gallery talks are reasonably explicit. The show at Sylvana Lorenz

- *But out of an advanced point of view*

- It doesn't have the univocal position. I think that's a problematic point of view of active politics. One has to find one's position in relation to it. That's not so clearly defined in any particular case.

I don't think Fareed's work is didactic. Some of my projects are clearly didactic.

It depends on the project. There is no unifying element of what I do. There are certain topics which reappear, basically, crisis in biodiversity, extinction, to me this is quite a significant topic. Because I think, it's a very concrete political issue, in relation to tropical ecology and that in relationship to crisis of so called first world versus so called developing world, north-south policy. Those kind of issues and relations to local ecology. But I think that also because it collects a lot of interests; visuality, art, media, all of these things are embodied in this one issue. I'm interested in not thinking so much about what you do as a collection of discrete art works but as a practise in some way. But I think some of the other people are interested in particularly addressing a practise, that would mean a whole variety of things, in some way unified but not necessarily justified by gallery. They might include film making, they might include teaching, they might include writing, publishing like in Christopher Wool's case, or more formal, they can certainly unite, they very often do through art exhibitions in a very conservative manner, they might include public work, they do include the whole variety of territories, that don't fit into a banal definition what art world is, which is basically museum and gallery work, they may include working with other organizations and offices, they very often involve collaborations or brief alliances for raising to other fields like film making.

- *In the last issue we made an interview with the students, Friesenwall has also been working with*

- I guess Friesenwall is absolute an example of that kind of activity. There is nothing that defines them as particular group, I think they cooperate on different things. Some are quite didactic, some are not so didactic, some involved art consciousness, some involved what almost looks like a couple of people watching television, and I do not think that that variety, I mean I'm very disappointed that several people believe that Friesenwall is just one thing that happens in one place, because Strau and Dillemath, actually I have enough faith in them to say whatever they do, it's their concept. Friesenwall is their concept. The directions, they take it, I think they are quite interesting. There is very interesting questions about, what kind of inclusions they allow, I don't want to say what kind of inclusions they start, but in the end I think Friesenwall is an excellent example of what it means to have a practise. In this case it collects around one space, but things, certainly not from Dillemath's position, things would happen, necessarily mean a space, that space could be in a video tape, could be in a magazine, could be in a whole variety of things. I think Friesenwall as the space, the archive, somehow you are getting a very smart article about what it is, or actually could be. I think there are really exciting projects. Sometimes what they do will fail, but that's part of what it means to experiment. You have a theory and maybe it holds up and maybe it doesn't hold up. And they are very concrete about that.

- *How could a magazine work in this?*

- I've been involved in several magazine projects some have happened, some not.

- *How could it work?*

- In relation to Friesenwall? I think I would put together a magazine that blurred the distinctions between so called fine art culture, high culture and mass media culture. Certainly here in the states those distinctions are blurred all the time. It is merely certain magazines that maintain that distinctions. I think something that did cover a wider range of what we consider to be culture, than merely fine art, but we include that as certainly one of the most experimental fields in culture.

- *You don't need this allowance*

- This is what certainly rouses a lot of people. You find all of these strange characters, because it doesn't have such a formal beginning as other fields. There are always people on the margin of other fields like anthropology, geography, music, at times even if they are refused a position in their own field, they can

find a position in art. So there is always people like Peter Fend, even if there is no room for people like Peter Fend, if there is no official room for people like Peter Fend, in architecture or geography. There are some of these other fields which have particular constraints.

The best thing about being an artist is you don't have to ask anyone's permission to do anything, it's not like making a film where you constantly have to ask someone's permission, you always have to ask people for technical assistance, for money, that doesn't exclude that that becomes art, but, the best thing about being an artist is that you don't have to constantly ask for someone's permission to do. That's why art remains one of these great catch outs for all these people experimenting in other forms of culture.

This is kind of cutting edge environmental theory and it ends up in the art world, because nobody else can handle it. This happens to a lot of people. Also I think in terms of around official culture, in particular media, things like video. There, as much as formal distinctions and formal positions like mtv, brings a bad market on this idea of radicality in a progress of atmosphere in fact that's exactly the opposite of what they do, which is to modify these considerations that there is little experimentation in this kind of idea of what it means to be on this skin of the balloon,

- *Your interest in extinction*

-I think, it's a very interesting issue, because it ends as the larger framework, or it ends as a lot of problems that we have in relation considering our relation to nature. For example, it's most obviously because in our social situation it's much easier to get money behind a project that's going to save lets say a Panda bear, or a seal breeding ground, then it's to protect an area that's going to have a larger biomass, a larger number of plants and animal species, it's much easier to protect a single species, this is called the survival of the cutest, and this is the charismatic megafauna, animals that it is very easy to get a lot of money going to protect them. This is conceived by the people, who run the environmental political work here, as a way to protect other species. For example if you want to protect a part of a fauna, you want to protect the whole one, the plants the insects, everything all the way up, obviously. You protect the ecosystem, but it's very hard to raise money to protect an eco system, it's very easy to raise money to protect a panda bear, so you raise money around. You use this panda bear as an example, how that works technically, for them it's good, how that works in culture furthers our problems, just relates to a continued ignorance of most people in relation to ecology, relation to what ecology means. So you are doing practically a good thing in protecting this particular specie, but conceptually you are working against yourself, because you are not furthering the idea of what an ecosystem is, you are not bringing around these sort of wider nature concerns.

Around the idea of species extinction are a whole other group of ideas. For example most species extinction happens in the areas of the most biological diversity, which are the tropical rainforests. You always hear so much about the tropical rainforests, because they only take about a sixth of the planets landmass but they contain well over one half of the species. The majority of living things are there, in the tropical rainforests. This is why people are so upset of the continued destruction of the tropical rainforests.

On one hand you have to be very sceptical of why people from United States and Europe are so involved in the tropical rainforests of Asia, Africa and south America. This is the history of colonialism, the history of inequality, but at the same time you kind of understand why they are interested in those areas, because that's really the area of megadiversity in the world. And that's where we are loosing the most species. Environmentalists will tell you that we are loosing what number a day of species but they won't tell you that these species are mostly beetles, mostly insects, because that would be against a kind of public relations.

Species extinction is a very particular issue, it ranges among others, which are mostly kind of postcolonial concerns, which are basically exploitation concerns, usually related to north American and European impositions of agricultural technology on to the third world and in relation to north American and European consumption values, consumption demands on environments in the southern hemisphere.

- *But to cut down political processes to their formal aspects, is not sufficient. Or cutting it down to a visuality.*

- But, certainly in the history of western art

-*But there doesn't exist such a big history of political art*

- There does

You could say Goya, you could say Vermeer, you could say Picasso. You could continue the line up, but there has always been. Certainly at least since post worldwar one. I would say that's almost a dominant concern, one of many, one of several dominant concerns. I think some of the most significant work has been done. Dadaism, surrealism. Here in the states you had a very different relation, you had work which is functioning against social realism, so you had the abstract expressionists who really were extremely political people, in relation to, many of them were communist party members. They were very socially motivated, and they believed that their revolt of form, was a political revolt. That their painting in this way, the destruction of European sensibility of composition, was a political act.

Fundamentally you have to agree, that political people make political work. And it's very clear to me, who is doing this kind of work, since they are concerned of the issues, and who is using there sense.

- *But then you could say that extreme individualism is also political*

-Yes it could, but I don't care, it has the same resentments in culture, and that's what an artist means to me. This is someway to function within culture, against the grain.

I don't really give a shit about so called high culture, as that wasn't my culture ever. I don't really particular identify with say museum culture. To me the idea of the museum is not something in intention, because I don't even think of it as in my world.

The museum of natural history is in my world, it does embody my concerns and it embodies the struggle for the meaning of what I'm interested in, which is the changing figure in representation of nature.

But for example I think, whenever one is regarding issues of political art to me, you have always be conscious of opportunism, I think there is a lot of that kind of situation, which has to be carefully watched.

Which has a lot to do with to judge motivation For example I know people who judge the motivation of Friesenwall, but I know them well enough that I have absolutely no suspicion of their motivation. It's a very easy accusation to make, and a very impossible accusation to prove, so I think it's very dangerous, but on the other hand one has to continue the lookout for opportunism, particular regards addressing political concerns.

I don't think that what I do is the totalizing practise, for what other artists do. I don't think of that as the totalizing practise, so there are certain criteria that I would put into a particular project, that might not share any of them. some work may be intellectual exercises in question, that don't have very broad political expression, or very broad superspection, that are intellectual games for myself, that don't concern a lot of people, just a handful of shared friends. In other cases I do experimental design for a notion of a specific public, generally knowing what that would be, in relation to each particular project. When I did the project for the Belize Zoo, I knew who the audience was.

- *How did this happen, the project for the Belize Zoo?*

-I had been to Belize for several times, and I had noticed that the work that was done was really amiable, and really interesting, but exactly what in some cases it lacked was questions of representation. This kind of problem, in these cases was really concrete, a certain gap, a certain problem that I could very easily fill, as an artist. So I approached them, and they were excited about it, they where used to deal with people on this kind of level, where people share this program with them, and help them out, because the work that they do, is so interesting anyway and so dynamic, so it was very easy to work with them. They came up with the system together more or less, and I came up with the guidance, basically, I would write the text, and they would make whatever changes they have to make, and we worked reasonably fast together.

I would like to continue work with organizations like that, but it's not always possible. I find that hard in the United states to do that. These organizations they already have so much money, they don't have to worry about certain other things. An organization like that, normally wouldn't deal with people outside of their organization, they have so much more money. They were much more open in many many ways, and in the end they have to find a control over what happens.