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Bending the Word

September 28, 2008, through February 8, 2009



Tris Vonna-Michell: *Finding Chopin*, 2008; performance still, *Reykjavik Experiment Marathon*, Reykjavik Art Museum, Reykjavik, 2008; courtesy of the artist and Cabinet, London. Photo: Karl Petersson.

Exhibition features four artists who re-imagine shared narratives, weaving new meanings through a variety of artistic means

*FREE Admission; Opening Performance: September 28, 2008, 3 p.m.

Berkeley, CA, September 9, 2008 — The University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA) presents **Bending the Word**, an exhibition that brings together four artists who re-imagine the art of storytelling: Martha Colburn, Patricia Esquivias, Olivia Plender, and Tris Vonna-Michell. Each of the artists actively re-interprets shared narratives, from ancient fables and religious texts to official histories and current events. Their work mixes fact and fiction, resurrects lost histories, connects disparate stories, and inserts the personal and anecdotal into larger cultural narratives. The artists take these narratives and weave new meanings and open up critiques through a variety of means, including filmmaking, comic book art, installation art, and performance art. **Bending the Word**, which is curated by Phyllis Wattis MATRIX

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC ARCHIVE

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Curator Elizabeth Thomas, marks the first major American museum exhibition for its four artists. The exhibition opens September 28, 2008, and runs through February 8, 2009.

Martha Colburn—an American animator, filmmaker, and artist who splits her time between New York, Los Angeles, and Amsterdam—creates truly fantastical filmic collages that layer her original imagery with found footage. Her animations rarely feature words, but they are densely packed with fragmented imagery that collides and combines into a narrative. *Myth Labs* (2008) draws from biblical sources, the current war on drugs, and U.S. social history, weaving a parable on poverty, vice, drug abuse, and power in contemporary society. In addition to being exhibited at numerous galleries and museums, Colburn's work has screened at many international film festivals; the Pacific Film Archive will present a program of her films in conjunction with the exhibition.

Patricia Esquivias, who received her MFA from the Bay Area's California College of the Arts in 2007, finds inspiration in the history of her native Spain. Her *Folklore* video series combines visual evidence, in the form of photographs, charts, and ephemera, with Esquivias' own off-the-cuff explanatory voiceover connecting the disparate parts. In *Folklore*, Esquivias, who lives in Mexico City and New York, mingles pop culture with Spanish history, locating that previously elusive point where Julio Iglesias meets General Franco. The series explains aspects of Spanish culture that remain in the collective consciousness, but are not chronicled in official histories. Knitting together trivial events, presumably but not verifiably true, her narrative is nevertheless seamless, belying the flexible filter of "reality" through which any narrative is constructed.

British artist Olivia Plender researches anomalous historical moments, producing comics, installations, performances, and videos that chronicle the intersection of social movements and individual agency. *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* (2008) looks at the sociological and political aspects of the Modern Spiritualist Movement in Britain and the United States, a religious movement that reached its peak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Plender's piece details how the performative act of channeling spirits served an indispensable transgressive function: as a form of storytelling, it enabled women to speak out for social change, something they never could have done using their own speaking voices.

Tris Vonna-Michell's performances capitalize on their live setting; narratives are constantly shaped and reshaped through each telling. This alteration acknowledges and embraces the fugitive and abstract qualities of the spoken word, in all its open-endedness and malleability. A UK native who balances his time between England and Germany, Vonna-Michell initially studied photography but has since turned to live storytelling and installation-based art. Works like *hahn/huhn* (evolving since 2004) are delivered rapidly and densely, with visual aids and props, to weave intricate fusions and confusions of identity in the biographies of three postwar individuals: Reinhold Hahn, Reinhold Huhn, and Otto Hahn. Vonna-Michell's live performances are extended through installations that combine sound, image, and object to allow visitors to guide their own alternate narration of his chosen subjects.

The kinds of pointed narratives practiced by these artists show the processes of imagination and analysis, and expose the relationships between concrete truths and abstract notions, that individuals face in making sense of the world and their place in it. These artists have something to tell us (and show us) about what we may not be seeing for ourselves, how a straight view of the world can be bent in countless ways.

Public Programs

Opening Day Performance

Tris Vonna-Michell

Sunday, September 28, 3 p.m.

Museum Theater

Reception follows in the Bancroft Lobby

Admission free!

Tris Vonna-Michell will perform the newest iteration of *hahn/huhn*. Evolving since 2004, the piece shows Vonna-Michell's intense delivery at times clearly articulated, at times a blur of staccato rhythm, producing the effect of an aural collage of representative passages juxtaposed with abstract fields of sound. By the end one realizes the narratives follow a logic of coincidences discovered or invented between facts and fictions, present and past, anecdote and personal experience. Vonna-Michell has had solo exhibitions at Kunsthalle Zurich and the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam. Vonna-Michell is currently participating in the 3rd Yokohama Triennale and the upcoming 2009 Tate Triennial.

Film screening with Martha Colburn

Tuesday, December 2

7:30 p.m.

PFA Theater

Special Event

***Evening of Confabulations* with writer Kevin Killian and special guests**

Saturday, January 31

7 p.m.

Museum Theater.

Support

The MATRIX Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis.

Additional donors to the MATRIX Program include the UAM Council MATRIX Endowment, Joachim and Nancy Bechtle, Maryellen and Frank Herringer, Noel and Penny Nellis, Roselyne C. Swig, Paul L. Wattis III, Paul Rickert, Iris Shimada, and Jane and Jeff Green.

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About BAM/PFA

The UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA) aims to inspire the imagination and ignite critical dialogue through contemporary and historical art and film, engaging audiences from the campus, Bay Area community, and beyond. BAM/PFA is one of the largest university art museums in the United States in both size and attendance, presenting fifteen art exhibitions and five hundred film programs each year. The museum's collection of more than 15,000 works includes exceptional examples of mid-twentieth-century painting, including important works by Hans Hofmann, Jackson Pollock, Eva Hesse, and Mark Rothko, as well as historical and contemporary Asian art, early American painting, Conceptual and contemporary international art, and California and Bay Area art. The PFA film and video collection now includes the largest group of Japanese films outside of Japan, as well as impressive holdings of Soviet silents, West Coast avant-garde cinema, seminal video art, rare animation, Central Asian productions, Eastern European cinema, and international classics.

Museum Information

Location: 2626 Bancroft Way, just below College Avenue near the UC Berkeley campus.
Gallery and Museum Store Hours: Wednesday to Sunday, 11 to 5. Closed Monday and Tuesday.

Admission: General admission is \$8; admission for seniors, disabled persons, non-UC Berkeley students, and young adults (13 – 17) is \$5; admission for BAM/PFA members, UC Berkeley students, staff and faculty, and children under 12 is free; admission for group tours is \$3 per person (to arrange a group tour, call [510] 642-5188). Admission is free on the first Thursday of each month.

Free admission to the MATRIX gallery: *We invite you to enjoy free admission to the MATRIX Gallery through February 8, 2009.*

Information: 24-hour recorded message (510) 642-0808; fax (510) 642-4889; TDD (510) 642-8734.

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