

THROWING SOME WEIGHT AROUND

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*the outer reaches of ourselves..
butting up, against the
edges of others...*

This text is a response to three pieces of work that shared a single wall. It is a response to the works, and to the curatorial choices that put them together. To the architecture of the exhibition. To the ways these pieces speak to each other, and the way they speak to us.

Before I begin this text, I stand holding a large solid block of wood placed inside the toe of a long black stocking. I revolve several times, gradually increasing my speed. The combined effects of centrifugal and centripetal forces cause the block to rise to shoulder height and swing out in a wide ring around my body. I slow down and thus gradually lower the block, eventually coming to a stop and placing it upright on the floor.

Before I begin this text, I write these words so they are projected onto the wall:

Thank god, we have an art which is turning back to politics.

Cornelia Parker's view of Noam Chomsky speaking his mind in *Chomskian Abstract* (2007); Rosemary Butcher's filmed dance piece *D2* (1990); and Miranda Pennell's extraordinarily tender screen puzzle, *You Made Me Love You* (2005) play on monitors, side by side, on a wall on the mezzanine level at the heart of *What if...* This unique assembly of things reveals aspects of our culture, and the ways that we relate to one another – in an essential state of relationship – and of the delights, responsibilities and complexities that come with that. Human subjects, depicted on screen as they exist in our world – as physical mass, have different qualities of weight and weightedness, which they manage, contain or project in various ways, within intricate social and cultural structures, power relations, and shared space.

The placing of these works is prominent, in the main public space, on the first floor of the building, where no visitor to the show would miss them. Yet it is relaxed. It makes me think of Dan Graham's people-friendly, democratic, video installations. He displayed his own videos alongside cartoons to keep the kids happy while their parents watched, and alongside other works he thought important, in specially designed spaces where viewers of the work could also relax, could lie down, and settle into cushioned corners, look through glass walls and observe others watching or resting, could observe what other people were interested in. And also here, you can find a comfy corner to put your feet up. The headphone wires are good and long so you can choose your spot on the padded bench. You can listen, in beautiful clarity on comfy headphones, to the soundtrack of the films, or not. You can listen to the soundtrack of one and look at the image of another. And you look and listen alongside others, in a light space, properly aware of them. Different people behave differently. Some stand, some sit, some close their eyes. We are ourselves a version of society, being together, with these three thoughtful reflections on togetherness.

There is a vital, triangular symmetry to the arrangement of these three works, both in form and in content. Two colour films sit either side of a black and white. While all three films have a balanced frontality, the central film has a deeper perspective, greater sense of height, width, space and motion, leaving the works on the two ends holding a dramatic tension between them. Both these screens are focused, close to, on faces, and hold that focus and that proximity throughout. The relationship between the face and the screen however, and the feeling of the pieces is very different.

In both works the camera is fixed, in a taut, unbroken relationship with the face it is showing, eyes looking directly into the camera. Parker's camera and subject are both astonishingly still – at times dropping almost imperceptibly into actual frozen images before continuing, while both Pennell's camera and subjects, without breaking their direct, head-on connection, are more nervous and chaotic, both continually shifting, unpredictably, back and forth on a horizontal plane. The relationship in this film between camera and subjects is puzzling. The rules are unclear. Who has control, in this world of looking and shifting and searching? Pennell's subjects are unusually and strikingly uncontained by the frame. Indeed the soundtrack of her film, unlike the others which are trapped within headphones, is also uncontained. It plays directly from the monitor's speaker and bleeds out throughout the open spaces of the building. The title of Pennell's piece is also a puzzle – "You made me love you" seems to speak of seduction - which might be beautifully innocent, talking of the wide-eyed young people it reveals, of being with them. Or it might be not innocent, speaking to some wider culture that has unwittingly seduced us all.

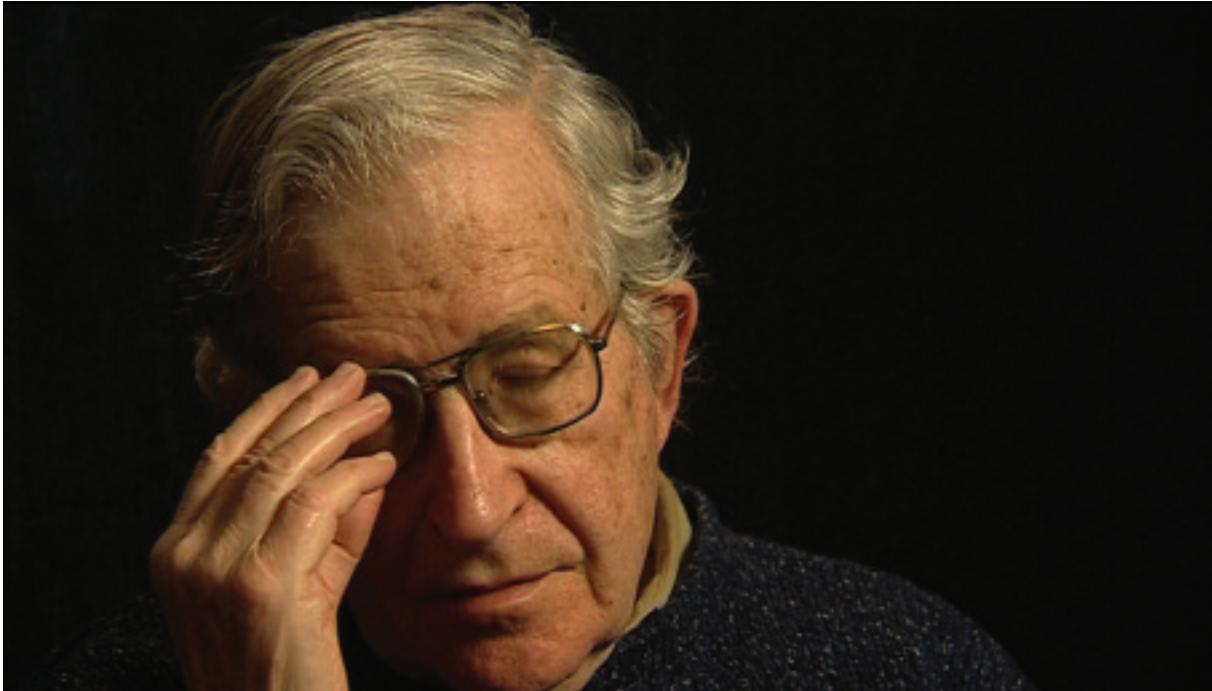
In contrast, Chomsky's body is ultimately contained, and barely moving in the frame, subjugated to his marvellously developed mind. It is his words which travel out beyond him and the tiny shifts in expression captured in the stills. While he is quietly fatherly and authoritative, the people in Pennell's film are young, flowing around in a different sort of world, in a different relationship with their bodies and the space. In the Parker, Chomsky is a weighted figure, centred, confident of his own position – albeit at real odds with the workings of the world as he describes them. His body contains him. It serves its purpose as a channel, delivering his ideas to the world.

The young people in Pennell's film are centred in the way that dancers are – upright, aligned around a mid-line that is shifting in space, but they are not, somehow, in possession of their bodies as free individuals. They are unweighted in a way – drifting, as a group. Their centre is somewhere outside of themselves, amongst and between them. Or rather it is held by the camera. They seem to pursue the camera, addicted to it. They appear to be looking in a mirror, pursuing their own image. Perhaps they could see themselves in the lens? Whatever the conceit, they are focused somehow outside of themselves. They move as a group, and are fixated on the means of image.

They, like us, are vulnerable to the external power of the image. And this resonates directly with what Chomsky is talking about in Parker's film: how people are herded, and controlled, how they go with the flow and behave one way in a group, but completely differently when left to themselves. He hints at the big personal changes – sacrifices - he has had to make in his own life, in order to step outside the given systems that control us.



Still from Miranda Pennell, *You Made Me Love You*



Still from Cornelia Parker, Chomskian Abstract

Rather than chasing the camera, Chomsky allows the camera. And Parker patiently waits, and entices him to speak his measured mind. This confident, understated figure, not courting an audience but rather sought out by the camera's eager, seeing eye, is incredibly poignant set against Pennell's group of young people. They are following the lens, working together, in a world of hopes and togetherness, but of chilling vulnerability and unresolved unknowing, and in the sinister presence of seduction.

In a quiet, unhurried tone, Chomsky carefully outlines his theory of how the advertising industry consciously creates "uninformed consumers, making irrational choices". He carefully describes how the state of consumerism we find ourselves existing in the grip of, is not a natural way of life but an imposed one. He illustrates his argument with a number of under-reported, real life atrocities - from the early targeting of religious and literary treasures in the bombings of Iraq to bullying work ethics imposed by corporations - perpetrated, in times of both war and peace, by our own cultures.

I write these words so they are shown on the wall:

Dancers fundamentally understand the concept of inter-subjectivity: that while we exist at the centre of our own world, we are also entities in the space and lives of others, and both affect, and are affected by, our surroundings.

Inter-subjectivity is – should be – at the heart of politics.

Between these two films sits a screen version of Butcher's *D2* (1990), which sites a cluster of prosaically swooping and arcing dancers inside a monumentally silent, solid, symmetrical and erect stone church. It is, in the most obvious ways, the only recognisable "dance" in the exhibition, and it is placed, not only centrally in the trio of works on this wall, but on the middle one of three floors, on the main bridging space between the glass walled front and back faces of the building, and between two further exhibition areas either side. It is right in the flowing centre of the building. This position does more than echo *D2* itself in the sense of flow and interchange of movement contained by a physical space. For Rosemary Butcher's work – so radical and pared down in its time - to be placed so pivotally, and to be viewable as the only bit of "real dancing" on show in this festival, demonstrates two things: 1) how far we have come in this medium, and 2) how adventurously this event has been curated. We stand at the present time within the dance art with a new sense of what it is, how it functions, where it functions, and who does it. *What if...* allows us to turn around from where we are now and look back at that work, radically re-contextualised at the centre of an aesthetic approach, rather than on the margins of one.

Butcher's piece begins with a quotation from a signature essay of US philosopher and art critic Harold

Rosenberg: "The city is a herd of individual minds". On one side Chomsky, having chosen a path of incandescent individual thinking – in collaboration with numerous others that he often references – is flying in the face of social imperatives and scrutinising the structures of image making and seduction that limit our individuality. On the other side of Butcher's film, a tear-inducingly tender and co-operative group of young people are tossed on an invisible sea, spellbound, driven by something mysteriously to do with their own image, in search of themselves. In the centre is a reference to Rosenberg, a thinker who placed the arts (indeed, in his theorising and championing of Action Painting, intuitive aesthetic expression of the *body*) at the centre of the search for human meaning, individuality and freedom.

Butcher's piece begins, with its quote, by announcing individuals as mashed together in the city, and shows them dancing around one another and together, finding ways to function as a group. In Butcher's piece the dancers function as individuals, working together. Each of them is not only weighted and centred in their body in a beautifully mature and buoyant way; but they are playing with that weight – deliberately launching it into space. The camera shows us their feet, stepping beneath themselves, catching their own weight and propelling it forward. It shows us their upper bodies bending, reaching way out into space in joy and risk. We see the private space of each individual, merging and co-operating with that of others. Each reaching out and turning in their limits, defining the extent of their own kinesphere, they cross the space in different ways, agreeing on when to go and when to stop. They stay evenly spaced from each other, at arms' breadth, giving each other room. It shows them, men and women, as equal, as different, and collaborating. In a beautiful efficacy of dance, Butcher makes weight and energy speak to us of human life and relationships. And a lone bird, flying silently across the screen in one of the exterior shots of the building, is enough to place us in relation to a larger, more complex realm of life forces, consciousness and motion.

I write these words:

Encapsulated within our physicality, lies a wealth of the world beyond - a web of politics and desire, of allegiances, of strategy, of tensions, and breaks, of power struggle, of loyalties and disap-

pointments, of dependence, of abuse, of risk, of bitter recollection, of possibility, of growth.

Institutions are fundamentally different from collaborations. In collaborations – individuals, as subjects, recognise the subjectivity of the other, and come together and contribute to something that is bigger than themselves, but they do not lose their own weight. They are present, as part of something. The power base is shared. *What if...* is a collaboration. It is a collaboration between women – that includes men. It is a collaboration (by its very title) that poses questions, and debate, does not impose answers. It brings different works together, places them in relationship to one another, to the physical world, and (with the spoken curatorial discussion and writers responses) to thought. From years of moving with and around one another, from sensing and moving the weight of the physical self into space, to meet the world, and in negotiation with that of others, dancers understand collaboration better than many.

I write these words so they remain on the wall:

It's all about weight, and centring, and centrifugal forces. The bubble that is the outer reaches of ourselves, butting up against the edges of others...



Photo: Andrew Downs