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CHINA BLUE

Sound artist China Blue was the subject of two solo exhibitions last Fall in Dijon, France and one in Tornio, Finland which closes April 3rd, 2005. On the eve of chairing a panel at the CAA conference in 2005 titled "Contact: Works that Create a Community Through Physical, Virtual or Momentary Relationships" she talked about her work with JILL CONNER. Photograph by BRUCE STRONG



(c) Bruce Strong

Although your sculpture is rather reductive in appearance, the use of sound suggests that language plays a central role. Wouldn't you say that this is an inversion of conceptual work that engages in a direct play with words?

For a while I worked intensely with words. I was originally interested in how I would sometimes experience a disconnect between word and object. One particular project I did, which focused on language, was one where I labeled things in my space so that I could remember them in case I ended up getting Alzheimer's like my grandmother. I had been worried that I would not remember things because already I have this problem of forgetting critical words or the names of people that I have known for years. I do not know if this is an

early form of Alzheimer's or just anxiety. But ,every misstep is always questioned because of this fear. When I attached the object with the sign I realized that the physical relationship of touching the object seemed like another way to look at the process of identification. I then looked at the number of steps it took to both walk to the object and identify it through either a process of pointing or touching. This was a physical relationship that I created with the immediate world around me. It therefore consisted of things that I have come to know as a door, window, tv, toaster, refrigerator etc. I began to describe these objects based on the way they would be sound verbally so that I would not forget. Initially I began with *r?*-*'z?* (rose), *dra-gan* (dragon), *ha?s* (house), and *tr?* (tree). Eventually I thought that pairing a word whose phonetic sound mimics the literal definition of another was interesting. I consider it to be a visualization of an idea, similar to the Chinese iconographic language.

Since Chinese is a complex language, in which different intonations of the same word can signify divergent meanings, can you explain such a linear relationship?

In the Chinese language a character is a symbol representing a sound and a concept. So, image, sound and concept are presented as one concise delivery of information. In this process, literal labeling becomes associated with both the verbal sound and the physical act of touching the object. This method of identification establishes a kinesiological relationship to the object. It reminds me of the relationship we have to the alarm clock when it rings since we know naturally where it exists because of the daily action we engage in, to turn it off. This physical relationship to objects lives in our bodies as a physical memory. It made me realize that we must have many such physically related memories.

How does this relationship between word and image influence your work with space?

Seeing space in this way and understanding feng-shui as the study of personal space, gave way to the audio/language pieces that I am now making. A definition I heard once was "audio is energy made physical." It was a definition that made a lot of sense to me because it nicely dovetails with the feng-shui perception of space as being always filled with energy. The type of 'energy' that is referred to is the energy of the people who have lived, and continue to live in homes where they also work. With feng-shui, one of the traditional solutions for problems in space is to use soothing sound. Thus my interest in focusing on audio was again stimulated based on this discovery. By using a combination of personal narrative, thoughts, poems and text, as the content for an audio source I felt that there was a fluid reciprocation with people who function as an energy source. This suggests that the existence of human energy is always present.



China Blue Josephine & Marion's Vent 2003
mixed media, with triggering system and audio
Courtesy the artist

During the late 1960's the British collective *Art & Language* stated that conceptual art could consist of "matter in one of its forms, either solid-state, gas-state or liquid state." Do you feel that your work reflects this early read on conceptual art?

Well, yes, working with energy can be seen in this way. The feng-shui idea is an effort to reorder energy. It is the belief that when you change the placement of furniture in your home, the life energy has shifted and thus stimulates a life change. Feng-shui is a philosophy that considers nature along with shifting personal requirements in relationship to how a space is used. These criteria are viewed in a balance and in relationship to each other. When one thing changes so do the others. I see it as a way of sculpting energy. Using feng-shui is a form of working which has a very open frame work. This openness is something that I am interested in, in the sense that it is one way to transcend borders and to incorporate the viewer and their energy as part of the work. The question is does the process of analyzing this space inform us in any significant way? If so, how does it give us a more informed view of life? The perspective that I have formed is one of a fluid space like water. I realized that connections between the continents and cultures are the oceans and waterways. Water is also a fluid condition that enables divergent spaces to exchange information. It is in this state of fluidity that I look to find answers to these questions.

The subjective, abstract aspect of your work transcends socio-political issues such as race and gender. How do you feel that your work can successfully engage the observer outside of a literal, shock-effect context, which is so characteristic of our politically-charged present?

I am interested in the transcendence of borders whether social, aesthetic, geographical or cultural because I view life as a big tapestry woven with multiple views of various cultures that create our world. And, it is my desire to always have bits and pieces of them around me. I am not interested in the direct pursuit of these topics but instead look at their borders so as to discover where these edges reside, what they are up against and what is the nature

of the space between them. They are important aspects that inform us and our actions. What occurs when the borders of two things are brought together? If one looks at the geographical borders between California and Mexico, what results is a culture that draws from the two and creates a fusion called CalMex. People speak both of the languages together and combine cuisines as well as cultures. It is an amalgamation of both, a hybrid.

Does art history influence your work to a large degree? In this light do you feel that the Western notion of beauty is irrelevant to contemporary art today?

I think that the concept of beauty is problematic. It is burdened with historical and patriarchal idealism that conflates the idea of celebration with the concept of inaccessibility. The Mona Lisa's smile, for example, is as opaque to comprehension.

You use feng-shui as a form of architectural therapy suggesting that discrepancies exist within the various types of spatial contexts which structure contemporary life. Does the practice of feng-shui help your work transcend literal meaning?

I see feng-shui as a non-hierarchical viewpoint. I like this idea because it refle

cts my interest in investigating the question of borders whether they are aesthetic, physical, geographical or social. My work also incorporates elements of architecture, sound, language and nature as well as feng-shui. I am interested in a holistic view of production that links divergent systems as a working model to look at what occurs when their borders touch. Being of Chinese & Swiss descent has enabled me to see life and the world as a collage of cultural experiences that are frequently shifting and changing. I was sent to Chinese school on Saturdays and sat in front of a TV during the week to learn German. My father practice Japanese sumi painting, and my mother made jewelry, while I learned to draw. It was a world where no cultural, language or craft/art borders existed. In my life experience, for instance, hearing the sounds of the Chinese language, eating Chinese food and visiting Chinatown might have been an afternoon's experience, while later in the evening I could be eating Fondu, looking at posters of the Alps and hearing Schweizerdeutsch.

What are some examples of feng-shui that exist within the social sphere?

The concept of Feng-shui in its seemingly subjective form, is to create harmony for people in relationship to their homes & offices and their personal needs for happiness, children, success, money etc. The idea is that the home or office is the center of their world and that when things change in the primary area it impacts the rest of their life. It is a social view of the butterfly effect that can be applied to many different types of spaces and locations like a room in a house, the location of a building on the street, a shopping mall, or the position of a home on a large country lot. Whether it is the study of the individual and their needs or groups of people it is about the study of the relationships of people, places and the fluxing condition of the world.

Does your work seek to accommodate the viewer?

The reason to incorporate the viewer is because feng-shui is a holistic concept and is about

incorporating those that occupy the space. This is an idea of inclusion.

Why have you chosen to work with feng-shui as opposed to either figuration or text that can be seen in various examples of Pop Art, such as Andy Warhol's "Brillo Box"?

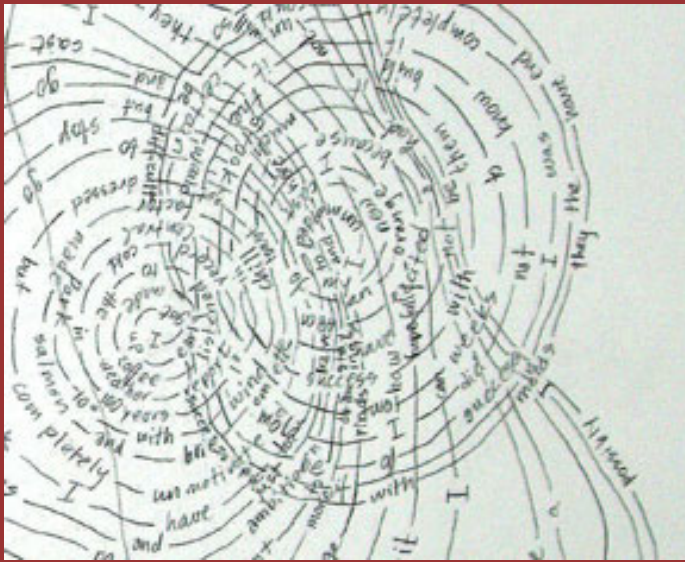
The western idea of the 'white cube' is a virginal space. With every new show it is perfectly clean, the holes drilled into the walls are filled and repainted stark white as if nothing had ever occurred. The Chinese idea is that a room comes with a history of those who were there before as well as those who are currently living or working in that space. This defines and creates a social inheritance in relationship to the space. It establishes that the past and the present create a future together and illustrates a philosophical relationship to space. In other words, we stand on the shoulders of our predecessors. This has nothing to do with either Andy Warhol or Pop Art's interest in the quotidian. It is in resistance to the thought that a space is a void and is a model for a social structure which could be extended to art production.

Why is it important for your work to accomodate the viewer? Richard Serra's "Torque" could be said to strive for the opposite.

What is interesting is creating a holistic concept that incorporates the viewer, the resident, the visual form and fluxing conditions of life. The "Torque" sculptures are not at all related because the intent is much different. Serra's work challenges architecture such that the incorporation of the viewer is an effect and not the intention.

Your drawings depict the mapping of sound, neatly splicing syllables of words across an expanse of space. Do these images intend to signify a particular metaphorical concept that can be easily accessed from a known sign-system?

I am interested in mapping human energy in the form of sound and words while simultaneously referencing the places we visit or inhabit. My intent is to map how energy theoretically fills, flows and shapes space based on the presence of a person or persons. I use phrases and diagrams to show the arc of the energy in rooms. Since sound is energy made physical this precisely illustrates my intent. Relating it to a space establishes another aspect of physicality, thus connecting the two seemingly unrelated arenas in a seamless way through the vehicle of sound.



China Blue **Landscape** 1-16-04
pencil on paper, 22-1/2 x 28-1/2 inches
Courtesy the Artist

Jill Conner is an art critic based in New York

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