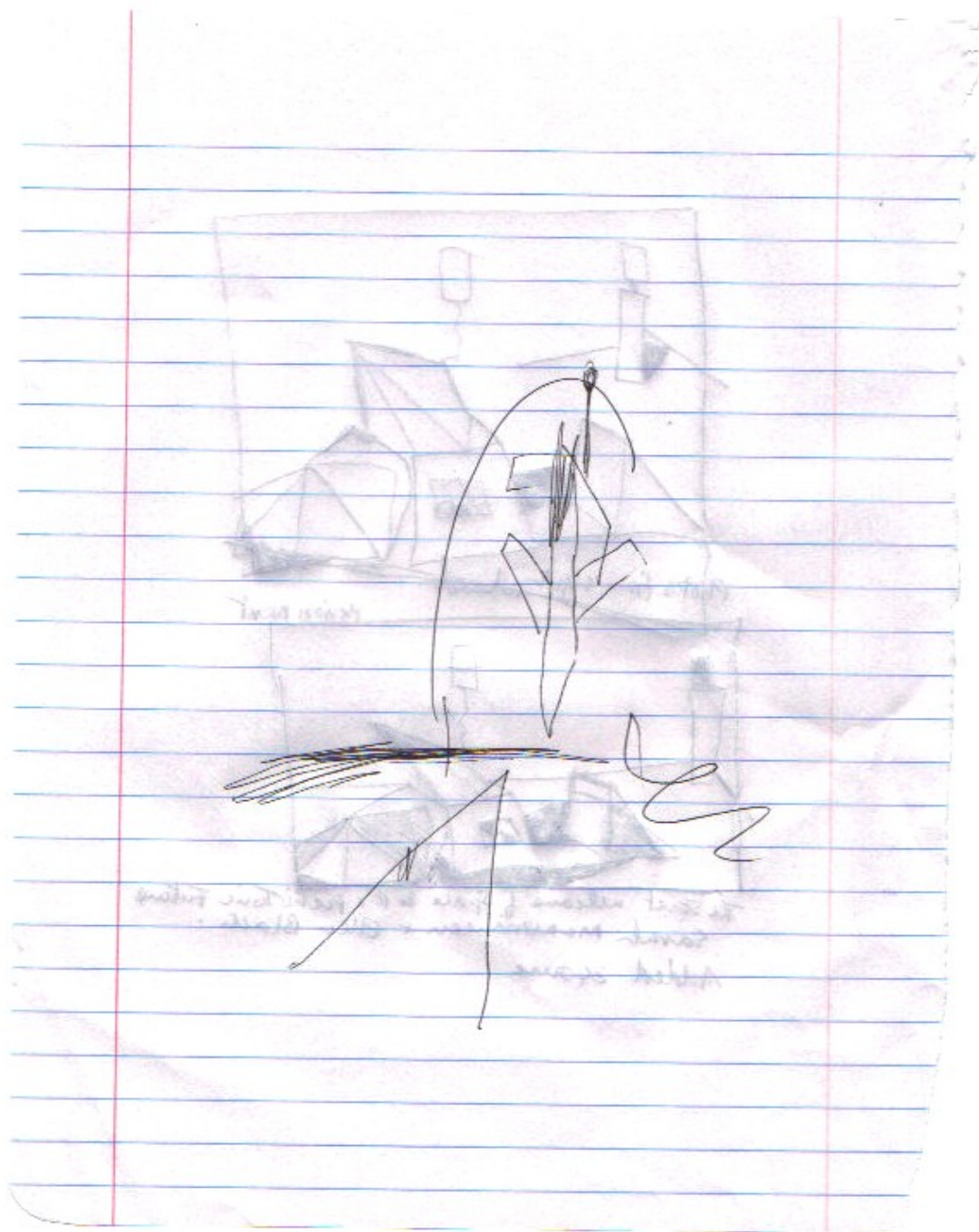


Moon Day. Art + Inspiration Document

On the art of: Ellen Black & Sarah McMenimen, Mariele

Neudecker, Tracey Snelling. One Day. July 2010.



Moon Poem.

There is by night three mushrooms that are the moon. As abruptly as the 'coo-coo' of a cuckoo clock, they rearrange themselves monthly at midnight. There are rare flowers in the garden, one hundred of them, little recumbent men, they're the reflections from a mirror. There is in my darkened room one luminous shuttle that prowls, then two... phosphorescent air craft, they are the reflections from a mirror. There is in my head a bee that talks.

Max Jacob. Paris 1916.

July 2010. A particular day in the San Francisco Bay area.

In a narrative of inspiration, it's a struggle with words, words that arise in the encounter between a singular wandering process and the almost shocking clarity of purpose in the art stumbled across.

10 am.

Tracey Snelling rings and we agree that she'll do a pick up and we'll go together to visit Mariele Neudecker at the Headlands art residency studios then back to Jack London Square in Oakland where she's showing 'Bordertown' as part of an event for the Oakland Underground film festival. It's a version of the piece that she'd exhibited at the Sundance film festival. She says she's curious to visit the Headlands as she's been turned down a few times for the residency. We laugh.

11.25am.

Pop down quickly to Sight School, a small shopfront space on the border of Oakland and Emmerlyville, let into the gallery by Michelle Blade, the artist who runs it. Ellen Black & Sarah McMenimen have put together a collaborative exhibition. Curious and engaged look around and read stuff. An initial sensation of familiarity, fed by a long standing love of the cryptic and a sense of a favorite London artist's, Fergal Stapleton's, obtuseness at work. But no, that couldn't be. That was somewhere else, some other time left behind, there are other schemes and tactics at play here. There's no rush, and somehow convinced and impressed enough to relax into the worlds presented, no agenda. Awkward chat with Michelle, one eye on the floor piece, some kind of lunar habitation model.

'Space 1999' like but presented as real. Over educated, and old enough to have watched man on the moon on the TV, don't personally fall for these false evidences of fantastic histories, these tricks, but am happy enough to enjoy the game. Wonder if these objects should be exhibited in a real museum, rewriting history. Impressed beyond measure that the artists appear to be dealing with issues of past and future, of history and fiction in a way that speaks directly to my own paradoxical feelings. What's going on? Strong sense of wanting to participate. Look at the video of some familiar US TV soap and consider the oddly and satisfyingly outmoded monitor it is playing on. Evidently some hidden message is intimated. Note that if bought the piece the monitor is included in the price ... nice. The supporting material is consummately well realized and complete, and if thought about too much, mind blowingly impressive.



the secret welcome of space
and its prehistoric future
Sarah Mc Menimen + Ellen Black .

"With the support of textbook, online, and conceptual research, Black & McMenimen have created free-standing sculptures using found materials and video. The work's material quality is an assemblage of theories toward the symbolic potential of the physical world, & the poetic associations they call into play are indicative of a mystical, exploratory countenance."

Sight School. Press Release.

12.15pm.

It must have been about then that own, (unconscious at that point), inspiration 'event' occurred. Might have been the word 'assemblage' or the scrappy drawing on the wall. Not sure.

Long term processes of struggling with desultory concepts , vague notions drawn while looking and thinking about art come together. Documents. Documents, a word thought of and consciously remembered. Go home again. The day had begun.

Start to look words up on the internet.

Etymology of „documenta “

The name of the exhibition is an invented word. The term is supposed to demonstrate the intention of every exhibition (in particular of the first documenta in 1955) to be a documentation of modern art“ Wikipedia on Documenta Kassel.

2:00pm

Have to log off as Tracey arrives and off we go. She reluctantly agrees to bring the dog. Couldn't make up the disorientation of driving within 25 minutes from a Mediterranean summer climate to something resembling that of the Scottish highlands. In winter. Mariele is waiting in a vast studio in some grand old barracks. She's experimenting with her patent mist making techniques in various glass containers, and comments that in a strange reversal the studio itself has become a life size clear tank with the mist swirling outside. A steady stream of visitors pass through, looking at the large crayon rubbings that she has been making of the nearby Nike missiles found at the museum up the road, over 30ft long they are reminiscent of recumbent medieval tomb knights on the floor... many people ask how the fog effect is created.. she explains the ingredients and process patiently, there's no mystery. Asked to mind the studio while she pops out, an opportunity is taken to furtively check the internet for another quick definition of the word 'document'... can't help it... for some reason the need to know has become urgent.

Wikipedia to the rescue again. It isn't the actual definition that's useful but this comment:

"The nominal 'document', like other nominals, exhibits familiar patterns of polysemy (a kind of ambiguity). For example, "document" might be used on an occasion to denote a certain body of information independently of how that information is

physically rendered (as in 'the Bible is my favorite document.');
'Have you finished reading all the documents for Monday's class
yet?'), or it might be used to denote a particular physical
instantiation of a body of information (as in 'that document is
worn and needs to be re-bound.'); *'Return the documents you*
borrowed to the reference desk.'). Wikipedia

Yes. That's it. Mariele had been explaining how she'd been researching the strange figure of Antonio Salieri, Mozart's supposed poisoner. She had said something about his cloak and indicated her primitive missile records. She was thinking about suitable titles. Am happy not to quite get what she's talking about, all sounds a bit cloak and dagger.

What if... what if there was a driving interest that wasn't geared to art at all.. what if what really caught desire was the way in which objects become documents. From Van Gogh's paintings to Antoinin Artaud's drawings attention is often caught up in the stories and lives they document, as if the works are physical instantiation's (useful word) of the bodies of these men. Artaud's drawings in particular with their scratchings, burnings and hammerings and rubbings are grounded in the moment of their event. Love that about art, captured intensity and think of the immediacy of Jackson Pollock's work, the actual flies in the paint. Seems important somehow.

Black and McMenimen seem to understand the power of objects

to be documents and in wit and wisdom are able to play with this understanding. An understanding that is a step beyond normal art critique and reaches to engage with something else...

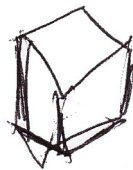
Mariele's work has changed over the decades, whereas before the landscape in her 'signature' tanks of fake atmospheres was painstakingly modeled, now real chunks of rock become miniature landscapes on which she sculpts little model bunkers. There is something satisfyingly brutal about this, less of a image based taking apart of 'German Romantic' cliché's, more of an actual 'act' or even 'gesture'. A confrontation of the miniaturized image by a real object. Having been around her work for more than a few years it's uncanny how, while at one point there's an involvement and belief in a modeled reality as image, (painstaking recreations of 'romantic' vistas in little fish tanks), there is actually a full scale ambition operating, until, one day, we find ourselves inhabiting life size Neudecker's. A shared walk in misty woods back in the UK brought this realization to the fore. But it was when visiting the Sequoia forest in inland California that some kind of perceptive force played tricks of scale. A larger than life Neudecker. An ambitious vision is a powerful thing, almost a force of nature. Looking through Mariele's catalogues find an image of the little 'black box' sculpture she showed in London a couple of years back. Didn't really notice it at the time. It's a model of a black box flight recorder usually recovered from aircraft crashes. An ultimate

grim document object. Her work always has such a direct concern with morbidity.. and this physical instantiation (it is a great word) cast in resin has a silence that speaks volumes about such concern.

Years ago, disillusioned with the boundaries of regular discourse on art, war and indeed on everything else, took a job at the Imperial War museum in London. Lost friends over it who couldn't get over the Imperial, or the War element, as if working there was somehow a celebration of Imperial War. With simultaneous jobs both there and at the Tate Art Museum for a period ... looking for something and finding a comparison between the affects of museum objects in the different museums. Basically what was the difference between a sculpture and a weapon such as a tank? Was it something to do with death?

On a last Tate visit to what is now Tate Britain there was a work on display by the artist Bob and Roberta Smith. It colourfully presented the bold statement MAKE ART NOT WAR. He explained that these were his fathers last words on his deathbed. Mariele describes a new piece by Fiona Banner now in the Tate Britain's neo-classical main hall, two real fighter jets, a Jaguar and a Harrier 'jump jet', the Harrier hanging vertically from the roof, the Jaguar resting on its side and polished to perfection. On the Tate website is a picture of an Airfix model Harrier. Concerned that she might be entering Banners's artistic territory Mariele

shows an image of it on her Apple Mac... it looks so impressive.
These three artists are immediate contemporaries and I love
them all to bits. We wonder how possible it would be to
somehow get Fiona and family invited to the Headlands next
year. Perhaps not in the summer if it's going to be this cold.



4.00pm.

At this point Tracey comes in, she'd been touring the other studios in the complex. She spends a while looking at the work and then we chat. She exchanges stories with Mariele about working in the international art world. Tracey describes her large work that now has its own non-profit status and is touring Museums throughout the US. We decide to take the dog to the beach, but we'll head up to the Missile station first, now a kind of museum, as Mariele has a favour to ask them.

She introduces us to the team looking after the site. We are treated to an enthusiastic and sometimes hilarious tour that includes soft drinks and cake. Mariele evidently spends days down in the missile silo making rubbings on paper of the missiles and has bonded with the team of volunteers there. She has help from a patient Headlands intern Molly. We are given an in-depth education on the technology. The Nike surface to air missiles would be fired high into the atmosphere and then were to drop to explode into the coordinated path of oncoming Russian nuclear bombers. They were never fired from this particular silo. It's impressive stuff, rocket technology that was developed only a few years after the German V2 were invented and fired up into the air and dropped onto London. These are much more sophisticated. We're told that anyone within a half mile radius of the launch would have been killed by the noise. Can't fathom why they needed two rockets with massive nuclear

payloads as well. Were they really going to detonate nuclear warheads in the path of the bombers just off the coast of San Francisco? Any romance, any glamour is hushed here. The whole area is informed by the outlandish deadness of a superseded technological nature. These objects, rockets, radars and bunkers are a monument to something unimaginable that might well have been. A line of defense against a possible threat, studied and mathematically worked out. Through military intelligence they knew the Russian bombers capabilities and likely tactics so as to be able to plan with confidence where to set the missiles to explode, tracking the planes trajectories with radars powerful enough to wipe out the local bird population. Tracey leans in and photographs the wiring behind an instrument panel. It is connected to some kind of complex analogue calculating device. The thought comes that the whole environment was at one point dedicated to looking out for something. Endlessly watching, endlessly prepared, a kind of intense perception machine. Literally plotting and coordinating potential threat. Potential lies heavy like some kind of unanswered question. Fear. Remember (so long ago now) sitting in the War Museum reading interviews with Paul Virillo in his book 'Pure War' and him saying that because the potential extinction of the species had become a horizon with nuclear weapons we were moving towards a common consciousness that we are all earthlings, identical- with all the fearsome and monstrous things that that presupposes.

Something about 'mega-interruption'... man's role reinterpreted in the face of the truth of a negative horizon. He theorised that individual death (supposedly foundation of all religious, mystical and magic thought) had been superseded by a more inclusive nihilism. Still need to think about this as got too depressed to at the time, and funnily enough have a sense that the 'Sight School' show might help. Also remember an interview with one of the Apollo astronauts describing leaving the Earth behind. How lonely it felt. The earth that is.

Mariele is arranging for a photographer to come and take photos down in the rocket bunker... she's been down there in the dark with the doors shut taking pictures and is planning to get large format high quality shots taken. One of the volunteers is a camera enthusiast and keen to help.

"We should picture the instrument which carries out our mental functions as resembling a compound microscope, or a apparatus, or something of the kind. On that basis, physical locality will correspond to a place inside the apparatus at which one of the preliminary stages of an image will come into being."

"The Interpretation of Dreams" Sigmund Freud.

Wonder at how dis-organised artifice can hold its own against the remorseless coordinated actuality of technological space

leads to thoughts of Black and McKinnon again. The moon fell victim to such actualization in the 1960's, it's dream reduced to dead rock. Impressive in a whole new way. They play obvious games with made up evidence and yet paradoxically convince. Stuck within a national condition of persuasion it is fertile territory and sometimes listening to the radio (just can't do TV) it is clear that basic disconnects are at work in the wide range of conspiracy theories being pitched. Like the crop circle maniacs in the UK faking elaborate drawings in wheatfields and convincing some of alien activity, these artists seem happy to throw fuel on the fire, rewinding history to an analogue age and faking it. Perhaps the earth is actually flat (and we've fallen off the edge).



It occurs that the technology we are being introduced to is almost comically outmoded and Mariele in particular chuckles at the buttons and the pad on which calculations were done in green pen prior to launch. The whole headlands set up is some technological out-land war zone. Endless bunkers and gun and mortar emplacement from various time periods dot the hillsides but it is the tidy little missile station with its portable operation rooms that remains chilling. Evidently the equipment used to be spread out across the area. Hidden. The grim scientists who worked on these rockets (missiles), and then onto the Apollo program, cut their teeth in real war developing Hitlers 'secret weapons' , part of an industrial society in full death drive, compromised collaborators in the organization of slave camps and mass murder who were then signed up to the flip side of a post war optimism . Perhaps it is the film Dr Strangelove which is superficially evoked for us as we tour the site. Awkward Black Humor. Peter Sellers camping it up as a mad German in a wheel chair and another comedian riding the bomb to extinction as if in a Rodeo. Mariele laughs again, both she and Tracey seem to find the missiles rather droll and pose happily for jokey photographs. Once upon a time this was deadly, and serious. Being taken on a personal tour distracts from the usual experience of touring a museum, an experience that involves a lot of reading of background material. This is quite immediate, as

if the site is still operational. Our guide is incredibly knowledgeable. Startled by dummies dressed in army uniforms in the guardhouses and by the cold summer wind we decide to leave for the beach.

"But why is it we laugh at this mechanical arrangement? It is doubtless strange that the history of a person or of a group should sometimes appear like a game worked by strings, or gearings, or springs; but from what source does the special character of this strangeness arise? What is it that makes it laughable?"

Henri Bergson. Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic.

As we stroll by the shoreline we discuss Mariele's nomination to submit a maquette for a sculpture to go on the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square. It's apt as the whole place is a giant and nugatory, neoclassical war memorial imposed over one of London's largest and liveliest, medieval marketplaces. A war zone to commemorate the Napoleonic War dead and a place made for the giant warrior Nelson to keep an eye on things. The empty plinth is behind his back. I inhabited this stupid square at the heart of the British state for a few years and suddenly realise why the headlands environment feels oddly familiar. Decide to keep this odd reflection to myself as it doesn't really add up.

4.30pm

Tracey needs to get back to Oakland as she's going to be interviewed. Mariele heads back to work. She and Molly wrapped one of the radars in paper yesterday and did a crayon rubbing of it... she's keen to flatten it out. As always humbled by her work ethic and how it is coupled with good humored efficiency. They are making a record of the site with a technique usually reserved for European Cathedrals and churches, and it occurs that the result are actually documents and that it's again time to contemplate the meaning of the word . The process she's using to literally get in touch with and record her new environment is objective, a simple (yet rhythmic and repetitive) capturing of the object rather than making a representation of it. She's concerned at how to present the rubbings, which, in the context of her studio, take on an abstract quality; those of the base of the rocket begin to look like standard abstract paintings, and I have to resist the tendency to place such documents prematurely back into pre-fabricated art language .

This work refutes the idea that reality is definable as an aspect of language and that somehow it has become possible to reduce it to coordinated digital information. There is an edge being explored and documented by these artists, the frontiers of complex dimensions that resist coordination. Art not War.

4.00pm Tracey tells a story about walking up the winding and deserted headlands road dressed as the starlet in the 1950 film noir "Woman on the Run."

The vision is sharp and clear and grounded in both the reality around us and a shared vocabulary of film images. As she drives she laughingly describes a couple pulling over in their car and asking if she needed any assistance, as if they too were part of the film reality and there was natural alarm in a 1950's glamorous starlet loose in this landscape. Out of place glamor. It is likely they wouldn't have stopped if she'd been wearing hiking boots and it is that sense of interface between fantasy and reality, between a romance (or cliché) of a damsel in distress and the sometimes grim realism and fear often portrayed in American film that informs her art. Fantasy figures and and nauseating peril. The Crime Novel, as translated to the screen, comes to life through the architectures she puts together and documents with thrown together specificity.

We drive back to Oakland across the Richmond bridge, it's nice to be driven and have time to contemplate for a change, always

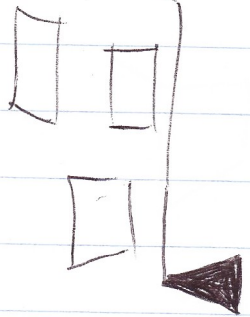
still surprised by the scale of industrial America, the unexpected distances and the way factories and industrial plants are integrated with housing and nature. Notice Motels and back lots. Trains of thought continually interrupted, but that's to the good. Everything today is taking shape in the unexpected relations between artists, and there seems a whole host of people and possibilities absentmindedly at work in my musings. From the visit to Sight School onwards there's been the sense of an interconnected multiplicity at work that takes force from quotidian interruptions. Luckily, when browsing Wikipedia notes were made. A good deal was made there of the economics of 'documents', of the chain of production in making a document such as a book. Lots of people involved. This sets up a reverie on the economy at work in the art experience. Is it similarly simply a documentary economy? In a way it would be a relief to understand it in such a neat way and move on free at last from an unknown compulsion to art, slave perhaps to some awful and redundant Oedipal fetishism.

The feeling of circling around the experiences of the day, of the art presented, continues inexorably, the involuntary nature of the thought processes perhaps a cause for concern. Perhaps not.

There is a truth in the way Tracey captures the 'Bordertowns', the dusty Mexicana of America (my father continually corrects any reference to America as meaning just the USA... for him America is the entire continent, Canada, South America, everything, it is

all America); it is a photographic vision, a cliched truth that resonates all the more because she includes within it, often miniaturized, filmic dreams alive with the clash between romance and realism. This is perhaps the violence contained like a genie held in a bottle, a sharp tension whose blade glints inside the buildings found in her diorama's. Held in check, looped endlessly this sickening contradiction lends real weight to the pathos of the blinking electric signs. Rear Windows. There is no judgment on her part, just pragmatic use of material, leading to wonder at the actual nature of the photographer's one eyed dispassionate gaze and how it is coupled here and there with the made up drama of film set action. The clash between realism and skewed glamor.

MOTEL



On the car radio there is a bulletin about a mass grave found near Mexico City. Drug cartel related.

She's a good driver and it only takes thirty minutes to get to her studio. Smooth and fast acceleration. We don't talk about art, just look and chat. She tells of a recent trip to Tijuana to document the Chinese community there. The ultimate Bordertown, it is the busiest border crossing place in the world. Reportedly violent and distressed she said it was comfortable enough and very rewarding to visit. She is like a strange tourist in these places. In August she's going to stay in China again for a while. As we discuss the alarming rise in homicides in Mexican border cities, unsuccessfully try and remember the name of another border town now officially called "the most violent zone in the world outside of declared war zones." (The city of Ciudad Juárez with at least 2000 murders in 2009). She shows me the photographs of the Tijuana trip. She has a particular eye for laconic details. Her studio is in a warehouse in Oakland by the old docks and the freeway. It is in an interesting area but Tracey was earlier complaining to a retired Oakland cop at the missile base about being woken by gunshots at night. Inside the studio is piled high with work in progress, one thing seemingly connected to the rest in a restless production. The sheer constancy of the work of assemblage is evident and impressive and builds an ad hoc nature that is flush with the way that the

worlds that she documents are actually put together. The sense of this assemblage being provoked from within the photo cliché but then breaking out of its limitations is joyfully liberating and ongoing.

In-habitation of the role of tourist enables the capture of a particular way of looking at the world. A capture she then uses as a part of her constructed realities for us to look at. Like a lot of good art we find ourselves being able to examine the nature of the gaze, and in this case understand it as but part of a whole in process. Walking around the back of one of her buildings the tangled wires and media players glory in their visibility and deny any of the easy identification with craft that usually seems demanded in Bay Area art.

5pm. It occurs that it is an empowering sense of assemblage that resonates in the work of these mature artworks. Chance and emotional resonance are allowed free play within life sized discipline. Like Fiona Banner in London there is a move through the controlling aspect of model making, to a potentially explosive engagement with full scale life and desire. These artists are open and inclusive enough to confront and work with difficult actuality . There seems to be sovereign ability to play with and articulate such reality and the fictions and romances that might lie behind them. It is the breadth of understanding and range of material that impresses. Whether presenting objects of delirious fact making, in a sort of science fiction

history, or co-opting military technology into the mystery of Mozart or playing the role of a femme fatale and touring the 'wrong side of town' for locations, everything gets put together and taken apart, fact and fiction reconfigured with penetrating and profoundly collaborative humour and fearlessness.

Inspiration.



Immanent to these varied practices is a resistance of some kind, try to think of its definition but give up happily... there is a sense of the world that is bigger and more grounded and that cuts through the general and ineffectual fog of disconnected journalism and media reporting, of arbitrary and cruel boundaries, ambition that challenges what the activist and writer Felix Guattari called "The leveling and infantilizing effects of the capitalist production of signifiers." Through modeled realities and assemblage different dimensions are indicated that can't help acting as a challenge to normative neo-liberal orthodoxies (and its included reactions) and put us in touch with both the uncomfortable (and everyday) realities of war and death (that must be freely acted against without fear) and the joyful way that life is actually put together.

The day ends at Jack London square where the Film Festival is being set up. Tracy sets to arranging the installation while being interviewed by phone. It dawns that over the course of a day there's been an unwitting and absent minded re-location into the rocket fueled heterogeneity and ongoing quiet power of a new generation of artists at work .

Phil King. July 2010.