Looking At/Looking Through
Adelheid Mers & Patrick McGee

Adelheid Mers and Patrick McGee have together and worked side by side for 15 years. United by their love in maps and in measures, in narratives and in navigation that take very different routes, they now and then seek out opportunities to jointly show their work.

Adelheid Mers: Patrick, people who know you also know that you take a great interest in history, in politics, in daily affairs, and even in various conspiracy theories. However, it seems that in your artwork there is no reference to this. Why?

Patrick McGee: Politics and history represent the daily grind of labor and of strife, of invention and of competition, of loss and of gain. As much as it fascinates me to piece together people's needs, wants, and circumstances, all the while learning about the ingenuity that they muster to respond to their experiences, in my artwork I am looking for a more meditative approach.

AM: Meditative?

PM: I am trying to describe how we pattern the immediate world by ordering and by demarcating it, by inventing systems in which to physically order information. I am also investigating how we choose to read spatial patterns that have already been created, for example, in architecture. In my installations, I will often attempt to make references to the way I read the specific space the artwork is intended to be in, by responding to the environment of the exhibition space.

AM: How did you choose your materials?

PM: For the same reason another artist might choose a pencil to make a drawing. Because it makes a line. I want to make a line. String accomplishes that in space. We could just as easily talk about color. Segments of the line are orange because it grabs your attention in an environment that is more complex than a sheet of paper. The orange section of the string installation demarcates the presence of a shape or a body that emerges from the greater grid.

AM: What do you want a viewer to take away from your work?

PM: I want the viewer to experience my installation. That experience may involve plotting, visually recreating parts of my process, or playing with focus among the lines. Ideally, you don't need to remember the specifics of the art object, but you ought to remember succinctly what it was like to be there.

AM: From the day you arrive in a gallery or exhibition space, what is the process necessary to complete your installation?

PM: The first step is to spend time on location. After at least one initial visit, I make drawings and often build a model of the space, so when I arrive in the gallery to complete the installation, I will have a detailed collaboration I need to do. The actual installation process requires careful measurements and laser sighting to trace the path that each string will take. After all the strings have been set, the color is applied.

AM: Your interest in string-works followed an interest in measuring and orienting devices. Could you speak to this? Did you find a connection between your present and previous work?

PM: Yes. An extended body of work called "Bureau of Standards" was comprised of levels, of responses to world maps, and of measuring devices that were based on my own body. I was then dealing with man-made systems of measurement and how they are based on long-standing conventions that can make them appear natural, even inevitable. By sidestepping these conventions, I wanted to emphasize how fluid experience can be, how it can be recast in a new framework at any moment. While these works embodied my reasoning about the mediation of experience, the string installations meditate actual experience.

Patrick McGee has been invited widely in Canada, and has also installed works in New York, Berlin, and Vienna. His past installations include string-works that respond to existing architectural features, including an EL track three-deep gauge section, and a full-scale reformed replication of the front entrance of Beatrix Galleries Johannes Ziehe.


AM: Why do you diagram books and other texts?

Adelheid Mers: I diagram essays and books because this is how I make sense of the texts. I read these texts to help make sense of what I experience. I have all kinds of questions and seem to have a knack for finding my answers in print.

PM: Do you believe that you are doing the authors of these texts justice?

AM: I heavily rely on an author's work, so it is imperative that I acknowledge my sources, but I am not necessarily trying to accurately retell an entire book. I select from it what intrigues me most. Sometimes I insert small elements from other narratives if they are derived from original sources, and from seminars, discussions on related subjects. Reading, talking, and making diagrams all hang together.

The Anderson Gallery owes its gratitude to the many individuals and institutions that have made this exhibition possible. First and foremost, we thank the artists, Adelheid Mers and Patrick McGee, for making their outstanding work available to our gallery, and for their congeniality throughout the planning and carrying out of this exhibition. Heartiest thanks are due to the panel members of our advisory discussion, Imaging Politics, for bringing their insight and lively discussion into the gallery: Thomas Krause, Maura Lyons, and Watson McGowan of Drake University Departments of Art, Art and Cultural Studies, respectively, and to Professor Michael Golec, of Iowa State University Departments of Art and Architecture. Our thanks, also, to Karl Schaefer and the Drake University Humanities Center for providing the funding for this panel. We would like to acknowledge the faculty and staff of our Department of Art and Design for their on-going support, and extend a special thanks to graphic design professor John Feider for his work in publication design.

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Adelheid Mers: Looking at the world and decoding it for further understanding. A subtle way of taking on the physical environment of the gallery space itself, it is about looking through McGee’s string-works, re-viewing the space within the gallery as we experience his installation for the first time.

PM: Adelheid, the themes that these diagrams and bonniers address seem to be very relevant in these pre-election times. How will this work appear after November 2nd, 2004, and is it a critical body of work outside of our national context?

AM: "Moral Politics", the book the three diagrams and the banners are derived from, was first published in 1996, during Clinton’s presidency. The second edition was published in 2002, at the beginning of President Bush’s term. It is a carefully researched, academic text, not a quickly assembled election season publication. The fact that I am reading it now was indeed prompted by the politics of the day, which I find harder and harder to understand as I continue to read the papers, watch the news and listen to people’s opinions. George Lakoff’s book addresses two fundamentally different moral systems that play out in all areas of life, thus impacting and determining politics. It seems that most people draw from both liberal and conservative belief systems to come up with their own, unique blends. Election campaigns address this moral diversity by attempting to consolidate voters’ positions. I think that the ideas developed in this book have a broad applicability across social and cultural contexts, and while I address some beliefs that are specific to groups within the United States, people from other countries who have seen the diagrams recognize the basic, moral outline as well, as do I if I look at my experiences growing up in Germany.

PM: How are your diagrams at?

AM: I make pictures from texts. As important as the content of the diagrams is to me personally, and as excited as I am if someone shares my interests, in the end I am involved in a formal endeavor. I think that “making sense” is one of the central human activities, and that we “make sense” by comparing stories. We frequently seem to need a fresh vehicle to tell our stories through, and once we are open and engaged, and I am working out what I hope is one contemporary way of “making sense.”

PM: One last question, Adelheid. What about the banners?

AM: In the diagrams, right and left are pretty neatly divided. The words paired on each of the banners can be found in the diagrams as well, but out in the space of the gallery the associations of these words to the texts are a bit less clear. By asking visitors to select a banner to pose with, they have another opportunity to engage their own moral or political belief system, apart from an association with the notions of liberal or conservative.

Born in Dusseldorf, Germany, ADELHEID MERS has couriered and secured extensively, in both the United States and abroad. Currently a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she has taught at various colleges and universities, and acts as curator for several import- ing. Adelheid Mers' work may be viewed at http://www.adelheidmers.com.