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CONVERSATIONS

Casual Paranoia: Violet Dennison

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by Tenzing Barshee

The obsession over an imminent or devastating catastrophe is a recurring social phenomenon. And in an age of technological acceleration, the signs that portend such lingering threats have multiplied. We might anticipate the next assault as around the corner or in the next email. Precisely such casual paranoia lies at the core of Violet Dennison's artistic inquiries. Whatever systems she investigates, she manages to underline and perforate their brittle structures. The potential agents of demise, both real and imagined ones, that the artist employs in her work are obscured in a delicate process, rendering her objects as supposedly isolated actors. But they are never alone. They're always only one element in a network of thought—and oftentimes they are grotesquely humorous. In this conversation, Dennison discusses an ancient and self-replicating utopia, what is "safe to drink," and hacking a printer.



Tenzing Barshee: What's going on in your studio right now?

Violet Dennison: I'm in the process of hacking a printer.

TB: What do you mean by "hacking"?

VD: I am controlling the object remotely and overriding its functions. Last October in the United States, some hackers latched onto a variety of appliances that are connected wirelessly and not particularly protected, like baby monitors and refrigerators, and used them to jam a large server, which brought down major sites like the New York Times, Netflix, and Reddit. The piece addresses how mundane objects can become terrorist tools, even be weaponized.

TB: And your hack isn't visible.

VD: Yeah, I guess no one would know.

TB: Do you have the required technical skills?

VD: I have a hacker friend I work with. But actually, it can be quite easy.

TB: Hacking, in this case, means accessing a machine from a computer in order to control it remotely?

VD: You can hack a printer and print hundreds of pages.

TB: When you reference an actual event and its potential ramifications, you point at these implications rather than actually simulating their functions. For you, it seems more important to evoke these implications through an object than to create an experience where you actually reproduce them.

VD: I like to think of art as a prompt for other people's imaginations. It's more generative to consider all its possibilities as opposed to just one.

TB: Let's talk about your recent exhibition at Jan Kaps in Cologne.

VD: The most prominent piece in the show was Pipe re-route (2017). I rerouted the drain of the sink, which is the only source of fresh water in the gallery, from the bathroom to the main space. The dirty water would pour out on the floor of the gallery. It was designed to have a blind spot in the sense that, while visitors were aware of the pipe's potential output, most people would use the sink as they regularly would. They would still use a lot of water, or pour the dirty mop bucket into the sink.

TB: How did this idea come about?

VD: It came in a flash, in a lightbulb-cartoon kind of way. The moment I thought of it, it made me laugh. After that I was stuck to it.

TB: Did you think at all about Michael Asher's piece Kunsthalle Bern, 1992 (1992)?

VD: Once the idea came to me, it was definitely on my mind.

TB: His piece emphasized the visible and invisible aspects of the institution's architecture and how they are experienced. By unearthing the building's heaters, aligning them in the foyer, and reconnecting them, the work not only guided the viewer through the different rooms but also created different sensations of temperature throughout the building. Your displacement of the gallery's internal structure seems more deadpan and useless to another degree, almost like a caricature of Asher's dysfunctional system.

VD: Right. We have a lot of similar concerns, but I think where we part ways is the interest in the institution as a closed system. I recognize the work is in a gallery, so of course it has this historical reference, or is in the style of institutional critique, but that reading can be limiting—in the sense that the gallery plumbing is connected to a much larger infrastructure and I have opened that loop, or created a new one.

TB: In your case the drain is misdirected and the dirty water breaches a part in its sequence where it otherwise would have left the building.

VD: There's a whole network through which the water runs, gets filtered, and returns. My piece breaks this loop. In this sense it is more like an open system. The dirty water pooling on the cement floor could damage the gallery, and the germs could be carried into the streets. There's something new happening.

TB: In the sense that the open system can be considered generative?

VD: Like how it forms new systems.

TB: By breaking one system, you're enabling another. As with other works of yours, there's an aspect of potentiality, a suggestive element. If someone would have left the water running, it might have severely damaged the gallery.

VD: Definitely, though for me the ideal state of the piece is quieter. Like every few days some art viewer is washing their hands. This exchange somehow becomes part of the work. And maybe that's the work itself there, the formation of the invisible germ soup on the floor. It is seeping into the cement or evaporating into the air. The work points to how fragile systems are. The gallery plumbing is a fragment of a much larger

infrastructure, but in a single gesture it can be derailed or sabotaged in a sense. Someone recently described my work as “casual paranoia.” I think we could apply that phrase to this work; and within that there is also idealism or hope that an individual without a lot of resources or power can make changes.

TB: That idea is quite beautiful. What else was in the exhibition?

VD: In the other room there was a video *HIDE Succession* (2017), which you could hear when you were viewing *Pipe re-route*. So as you are watching the scum accumulate at the end of the pipe, you can hear another potential narrative of bacteria leaving human bodies and taking over the world. Creating a new landscape.

TB: This spoken narrative is laid over a video that you’ve made.

VD: I shot it all on a police body camera at the Times Square subway station in New York. I’m walking endlessly through the subway during rush hour and recording the crowds.

TB: What’s the analogy between the swarming human bodies and the bacteria?

VD: It is more like the human is unknowingly a biosphere or a vessel for the bacteria. The bacteria begin to accumulate rapidly, like a harmful algal bloom, and then they take over. It echoes other mass extinctions, where the reproduction of bacteria has caused massive change. On the New York subway the flow of people echoes the flow of capital. Most of the people are workers coming from somewhere and trying to get somewhere. Times Square and its subway station is, whether it’s true or false, assumed to be one of the most targeted spaces for terrorist attacks. This architecture has layers of accumulated stress. You want to get in and out of these places as fast as possible. I was there for hours, partaking in this state of anxiety and pushing it further with this fiction.

TB: There was also a photograph in the exhibition.

VD: Yes, a fractured self-portrait I took in the diamond district in New York titled *Soft Target* (2017), which is a military term for an unprotected person or thing. The work is connected to the video *HIDE Succession*, in the way I imagined that the bacteria are surveilling us. That relates to how I used the body camera to anonymously record all these people.

TB: Let’s talk about *Transcend* (2017).

VD: This piece is made of seagrass I collected in Venice, Italy, and New Bedford, Massachusetts. The latter is one of the largest fishing ports in the United States. Leading up to this piece I was reading a lot about harmful algal blooms, and thinking of them as visible signs of bacterial takeover. The bacteria in these blooms cause the seagrass to suffocate. An influx of nutrients of nitrogen, which comes from human sewage, causes an imbalance in the water which suffocates the seagrass and it washes ashore—that’s when I collect it. The seagrass is like the kidney of the ocean, a filtration system, which is important to preserve. One of the most awe-inspiring aspects of the seagrass is that it is self-replicating, and its DNA is ancient. So I felt compelled to use the material, as it is outside of a human timescale and yet also stamped by human time.

TB: You’ve referred to the seagrass as an “an ancient, asexual, self-replicating utopia in shallow sea waters.”

VD: It’s a wise and beautiful material, and I use the corpse of it. It has some seeds in there that fall and can potentially be dispersed out of the gallery, into the city, and maybe, as with the water, there is new life that develops.

TB: At this year’s Liste Art Fair, you exhibited *Shastreamearthtrauma 0201608996,0201608511,0201608642,0201608616,02016089260201608727....* (2017), consisting of small copper casts of genetically modified corn seeds, which supposedly contain radio transponders. Is this something that exists, or did you imagine it?

VD: The corn with the RFID is imagined, but RFID is a real thing. It stands for “radio frequency identification,” and each one is unique. They are usually inserted into animals or consumer goods to track

their paths. I was interested in this very small form of a system creating a life object. Something that can be recognized by a computer, tracked, and categorized. That small chip can create a much larger feeling of surveillance.

TB: It's all there again: the casual paranoia, the nonhuman life form, the (broken or breached) system and other systems that are enabled through that. So what about the water coolers that you had in the gallery and at the fair booth?

VD: The work that was at Jan Kaps relates back to the idea of the mundane object as a terrorist tool. In the United States, water fountains are ubiquitous. You'll find them in most institutions. My fountains aren't functioning; they're disconnected. I was referencing, for example, public schools without access to potable water because their sources have been tainted (by fault of the government or corporations). It's akin to the printer piece, where there's a mental shift to when something gets declared unusable or even dangerous. The casual paranoia of the thinking of what has yet to be discovered.

TB: What could be discovered?

VD: Well, we now know that some water that had been declared "safe to drink" was actually contaminated for years. So now the public has to decode what "safe to drink" means for certain neighborhoods. The act of knowingly giving people water contaminated with lead or bacteria is an act of violence. So every time I put my mouth to a water fountain I think about power, control, and what I do not know.

TB: For the version at the art fair, you stripped the coolers bare.

VD: I was interested in the economic system that was revealed underneath—the exchange of commerce that must happen for each part to be created and connected. Each part is stamped with bar codes and inspection seals from different countries that have intricate trade relationships with each other.

TB: You keep unveiling these systems. Highlighting their visible and invisible aspects, how they are connected and how they condition each other. This seems to be an authorial drive in your work, to emphasize the linkages among different systems.

VD: Maybe it's a way of not taking the world at face value. I like to look at what is hiding in plain sight and how information is disseminated.