



JANICE RAHN
MICHAEL CAMPBELL

ALL ROADS LEAD TO
THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

KATHMANDU INTERNATIONAL
ART FESTIVAL 2012 NEPAL



JANICE RAHN & MICHAEL CAMPBELL

All Roads Lead to the Ends of the Earth

Essay by Donald Goodes

Artist Acknowledgements

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Janice Rahn & Michael Campbell
2013



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Nepal Works

Janice Rahn and Michael Campbell arrived in Nepal on November 2nd 2012 for the Second Kathmandu International Art Festival. During a month-long residency, they created two new artworks, collectively titled: All Roads Lead to the Ends of the Earth. The pair of collaborative sculptures took form as a result of the direct engagement with local people (artists and artisans) and local materials (from plastic bags to bamboo) as well as the economic, cultural and social realities that these embody.

All Roads Lead to the Ends of the Earth are the third major works from the wife and husband team--who normally pursue separate artistic practices. Like in their previous collaborative work, Elephant's Graveyard, 30 degrees Portside List (2008), these new site-specific pieces again demonstrate the maturity of each of their artistic practices and the negotiated coherence of their individual sensibilities.

Can't Hold Down a Moving Fish

In the courtyard of the Patan Museum, which hosted the Festival, Janice and Michael created the monumental sixty-five foot Balaine. It is made of 20 foot-long, 3-5 inch-thick bamboo poles, which the artists split vertically into quarters using a hammer and machete, and attached in parallel lines to iron rebar hoops of various sizes using black nylon zip ties. The linear bamboo creates open forms, like a sketch on paper. If we touch the body, it reacts and rebounds in movement, like a living thing.

The imagery is more evocative than specific, acknowledging that a thing, more often than not, has multiple identities simultaneously. It's long, narrow, rounded body form is decidedly fish-like, or, because of the scale, whale-like. There is a semblance of a dorsal fin and a left flipper, but both these elements open up towards other readings. The fin on its back suggests a submarine conning tower with hydroplanes, or a cross planted in the body. The appendage seems fragile, tethered by wires spread out in all directions attaching it to the ground and attempting to holding it up. The main body form seems to pass right through it, unencumbered. It moves through a tree found in the curve of the tail in the same ghost-like way, as if neither material or symbolic obstacles can slow its movement.

Paradoxically, the sculpture is a tangible bamboo wall across the museum yard. Physically it is a barrier but symbolically it is ephemeral. This is the paradox of matter being energy and vice-versa, in which our perception can flip from one dimension to another depending on where we choose to put our focus.

Roots Are the Basis of Freedom

Rococo Dress is displayed in a small gallery with a large window looking out into the museum yard. This sculptural form is similarly made of natural linear elements, principally with willow branches, which are more flexible but weaker than bamboo. Woven in its base are green, red and blue plastic bags, roots and other salvaged detritus collected by Michael and Janice in and around Kathmandu.

There is something plant-like and body-like in the form. The skirt of the base is wide and dense, a solid colorful anchor into the ground. Growing out of this is a leaning bulbous bodice, or a seed pod, or a mushroom stock. Its hollow geometric sculptural form, as in Balaine, is sketched using the open lines of the branches. The final segment of the work, the shoulders, explodes out of the bodice in arabesque loopings of willow--evocative of everything from twisted rebar at a demolition site, to the unruly path of an electron, to an out of control hairdo.

The back-and-forth interdependence between the three segments is what dominates our reading of the work: the free-spirit of the upper layer is held up by the organized form of the center. The top is dependent on the center's woven solidity to be able to transform the willow wisps into the expansive halo. Janice said, "The willow had a mind of its own. I finally let it go loose at the top, giving in to the will of the willow." The leaning middle grows out of the solid triangular symmetry of the base. Each has its own energy, its own contrasting identity, but also its function to make it all come together as a whole.

There is also a video element to Rococo Dress: a LCD flatscreen in the corner of the gallery space facing the sculpture. It presents an animated still-life with various cast metal elements (rusty gears, a decorative lamp piece, the unrecognizable spinning discs of an old film projector) in the foreground of a shallow space. Smoke periodically puffs out of a pipe. Little plants sprout up in two places, as if taking root in the rust-rich soil produced as the manufactured elements return to the earth. There is also a soundtrack of repetitive clicking machinery, mixed with field recordings of water recorded on site at river and in the wells of Kathmandu and its sister city Patan. Inserted in it the middle of

it all, like a cinematic daguerreotype, is a miniature artist (Janice) perpetually weaving willow branches. This creation in the midst of post-industrial decay tells us something of how the artists locate their art.

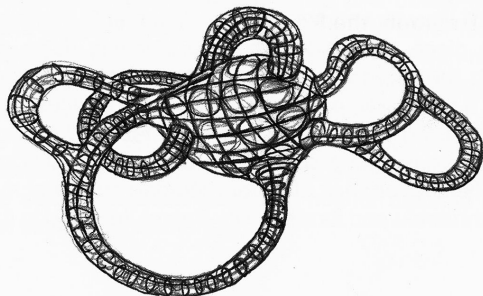
Weaving Strands of Canadian and Nepalese Cultures

The non-profit Siddhartha Arts Foundation, organized the second Kathmandu International Art Festival on the theme Earth/ Body/ Mind, bringing together 88 artists from 35 countries to “inspire the next generation of artists and art managers...and take contemporary Nepali art to an international level.” (Sangeeta Thapa, chairperson, Siddhartha Arts Foundation)

Rahn and Campbell come from one of the most developed countries in the world. They brought to the festival the established tradition of site-specific art, which, among other things, grew out of anti-colonial sentiments. Instead of imposing a preconceived idea of art for all occasions, the artists brought their creative process to the place and opened a dialogue.

Michael and Janice’s Nepal sculptures thoroughly engaged their separate and shared artistic interests and worldviews weaving them with overt local references. Their process was one of ongoing negotiation: “Michael and I have been going back and forth responding to each other’s drawing while the other one splits the bamboo on the site where we are building, thus getting a feel for the space.”

Michael brought to the collaboration his interest in vessels (submarines, boats and spaceships) as well as his long-standing interest in incorporating salvaged materials and media elements into evocative sculptural forms. Shortly after arriving in Kathmandu, he and Janice scoured the discarded flotsam and jetsam in the streets and the banks of the polluted Bagmati river and came up with a significant collection of discarded plastic bags, toys, sandals, cigarette packages



and brightly colored incense wrappers. This is the surplus of the burgeoning modern Kathmandu, which, as we saw above, made its way into Rococo Dress and Balaine.

Janice brought her wide-ranging interest in the imagery related to the female body: from Robert Crumb's grotesque women, to the exaggerated adornments of Rococo fashion and her obsession with gardening. She also brought her practice of seeking-out and valorizing the creative knowledge of local communities and putting it in her art. For her, the creative process began by interacting with local people and materials; she found an elder weaver, purchased bamboo and willow from his



yard, and hired him to guide them in the making of the works. She said, “I showed him some working drawings and talked about what we were doing. He was very attentive and asked questions about how we would construct it, with what materials for different supports. He said he would work with us and teach us how to work with bamboo.”

They both brought a common interest in materials, drawing, history and DIY (Do It Yourself), as well as a respect and a fascination for the ingenuity that comes from having limited means. Michael wrote, “It was unbelievable how the men delivered the bamboo, maneuvering these loads of fifty, 20-foot long poles through the crowded streets on a large trike.”

Salvaging Tradition, the Road Less Travelled

The artists’ choice and juxtaposition of materials are central to our reading of these works. Materials are imbued with a strong symbolic function, related to their own historic and economic origins. The natural materials, bamboo and willow, reference crafts and building techniques that relate back to artisanal craft guilds in the occident, or craft casts in south Asia, both dominant during these cultures’ respective agricultural revolutions and before. The rebar used as a support in both sculptures

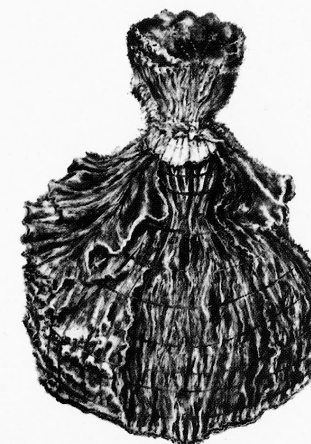
references the early industrial ages, in which steel became central to the creation of factories, the heroics of large-scale building and increasingly rapid and efficient transportation. With it came the division of labor and mass-production creating an increasing array of affordable consumer goods and ultimately the rise of a capitalist economy. The plastic zip ties (the only material brought from Canada) reference the refinement of the later technological ages of industrialization; the video takes us further into the digital age and the intensification of mass-production and mass-consumption. The plastic bags and other salvaged materials bring in the idea of the third industrial revolution, which seeks to make it all sustainable through, among other things, the use of recycling and renewable energy.

“Creative destruction” is a term used in the early 20th century by the Austrian economist and political scientist Joseph Schumpeter to describe how capitalist economic development arises out of the destruction of some prior economic order. There is an assumption that this is a natural evolutionary process, and history has given us a lot of evidence that supports this view. However, what seems to interest the artists in this material archeology spanning hundreds of years and several stages of human technological and social development, is the ingenuity of people to transform the salvaged by remixing discarded and lost materials and traditions with the new.

Janice writes in her journal: “It proved difficult to find materials used for centuries to construct baskets and simple furniture. The urban sprawl is displacing natural resources and many of the artisan who cultivated or lived in close proximity to their own materials.” With the help of San, their Nepalese assistant, Janice and Michael did find a source of bamboo and willow branches. Janice’s description of the intricacies of their adventure of going out to get the materials is punctuated by her observations of the overpowering of all things traditional by the modern. She tells of how an area that was once known as a community of weavers was being torn up to the point where it was not unrecognizable to their taxi driver. Monster homes rise up around the few remaining traditional homes that bravely display flowers and small, enclosed gardens.

The artists’ respectful regard is informed by their own cultural experience. In Nepal, listed as being among the poorest and least developed countries in the world, the artists saw an opportunity to seek out those things of cultural value that had not yet been subsumed by the logic of capitalism. One measure of “development” is how many people live in the city and the country. In Nepal 80% of the population is rural, working in agriculture, with many pockets of peasants living in an

age-old subsistence economy that includes the artisans. In Canada, it is the direct opposite, 80% are urban, working in a post-industrial economy. However, if one looks back, not long ago, in 1871, 80% or Canadians were rural. In the Canadian prairies, where Janice and Michael live, this was the case right into the 1900s. Culturally, the traditions of subsistence brought from Eastern Europe continued well into the seventies and resonate with westerners to this day.



In their Nepal works, Michael and Janice valorize that which is being lost, or destroyed in Kathmandu and in their own cultures. They are not an idealistic rejection of their culture of over-consumption; after all, the 5000 zip ties are what hold it all together. Nor are they a utopian reproduction of the craft traditions that they wish to see preserved. Instead they offer another narrative, one that questions the logic of creative destruction, and posits instead respectful integration. The artists give local materials and historical methods of construction a place of importance in their work by putting the natural traditional materials (bamboo and willow) front and center stage, while giving the industrial materials a supporting role. In the process, the artists do their part in bringing cultural traditions forward, by incorporating references to them into their pluralistic contemporary art language. This is a part of the cultural significance of Janice and Michael’s works. They are an example, a symbolic one, a plea almost, asking, Why must traditional economies be destroyed to access the benefits of the new economy? Why not work towards diversity, in a way to let economies and technologies coexist in a more egalitarian way?

Don Gudz, 2013











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Photos by Janice Rahn and Michael Campbell

This publication documents the collaborative installation by Janice Rahn and Michael Campbell during their three-week residency at the Patan Museum, November 1 - Nov 24, 2012, and exhibition at the Kathmandu International Art Festival, Nov. 25 - Dec. 21, 2012.

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