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A conversation with BILL BURNS– November 2008.



Bill Burns is a conceptual artist from Canada who lives and works in Toronto. His work has been exhibited internationally.- his project DOGS AND BOATS AND AIRPLANES will be exhibited at A.M. Richard-the opening is scheduled for Friday November 14th

Could you tell us about this project? I understand this study comprises photographs taken through your travels, of dogs, boats, and airplanes. How do these seemingly disparate subjects relate to one another?

BB: Well, on the one hand they are disparate, absurdist. On the other they can be thought of as ciphers to nature and civil life. Dogs interested me because in different places they appear as different creatures. They take on our cultural traits – they are now about class, now about race, now about glamour, now about advanced industrialism. The boats and airplanes mark globalize travel, big investment, disparity, perhaps romance. But also vessels, a way out.



*A fully illustrated book of postcards complements the exhibit (ed.69, published by MKG, Toronto). It should be noted that unlike your other publications (**Anagelsia, How to Help Animals Escape from Degraded Habitats, Safety Gear for Small Animals, Bird Radio – Vogelradio, 0.800.0fauna0flora**)-no text, instruction manual or theory accompanies this book. Was this to give you more freedom in adapting the exhibit as it travels from one city to the next?*

BB: I do think of the pictures as texts but I think that I wanted to leave room for evocation. I think it is a strong series and there is a little bit of information: the names of the places where I took the pictures and the dates.



*How did the idea to contact Diana Reyna, Council Member for Williamsburg, 34th District of the City of New York) and Hector Diaz, city clerk, came about? I kept thinking of this correspondence as a nice link to the oeuvre of **Ray Johnson**. Was he an influence?*

BB: I have an interest in democratic practice, its history, the Scottish Enlightenment and the like. I completely love the promise of liberal democracy (the delivery is still a problem). For me engagement with civil society is really important so I write many letters to public officials. I am grateful to Diana Reyna for her generous response. I think the people of Williamsburg have a very thoughtful member of the city council. I like Ray Johnson, I didn't think of that. I am a lover of **Joe Orton**'s work, he wrote many letters to theatre goers, theatre managers and the Chancellor of the Exchequer who was also the Censor of England. I am influenced by him.



A series of nine watercolors with curious text captions are hung in a separate room of the gallery. Assembled in sets of three, each narrative illustrates a specific episode taken in different stages of your life. Were these conceived concurrently with the snapshots? Can you explain how these autobiographical vignettes mesh with the theme of the exhibit?

BB: I think they mesh broadly on the theme of civil society. These pictures are illustrations for a series of writing I am working on about my adventures in the art world. In many ways art functions outside of civil society. This is particularly true of the way artists are branded and the way that value is determined through rumor and innuendo. I say this functions outside of civil society but that's not completely true. But it seems to me that many of the practices and relations between artists, museums, galleries and dealers, would be considered crazy elsewhere.



Your more recent installations, **Bird Radio-Radio Vogel, 0.800.0Flora0Fauna**, were conceived with user's guide. To fully experience the art on display, a certain amount of participation was required of the viewer. Through **Dogs and Boats and Airplanes**, the targeted participation has already occurred i.e. it is encapsulated in the documents stemming from the correspondences with Ms. Reyna and the **Purina dog food** representative. The process of acquiring objects (salt and pepper shakers, tea towels) via the web is also finalized as they are displayed in the gallery. Are you moving away from participatory processes?

BB: That's an interesting question. I think yes is part of the answer. Still I hope people come to read the letters and look at the pictures and the collections.



Is there a reason why you chose salt and pepper shakers and tea towels as collector's items?

BB: These are genuine collector's items. I chose them for that reason and the fact that there are a lot of them to choose from so the vocabulary is quite large. I think it is significant that many collector's items are vessels. They hold stuff.



Are you still photographing dogs and boats and airplanes? When do you consider a project finished?

BB: No I'm not finished, I would like to complete a series of medium format works in the photo series and I have a book or two in mind. I find dogs particularly interesting because of their role as double agents or inter locators between nature and life in the city. This is part of a very old story. Many origin stories hold dogs and dog-men in a special place as both protector and pariah; they act as guides to and from the city from the darkness beyond but they are forbidden to live with us.



What are you working on now?

BB: I have started working with a **children's choir**. We are developing a repertoire of the sounds of dogs and boats and airplanes. I worked with the same group of children on a video called **Bird Songs** for Toronto. It is currently showing at the University of Toronto's Doris McCarthy Gallery. In the same show I have produced a number of wall works - the latest is a large bar code based on the DNA of the **Common Snipe** (Gallinago Gallinago). The bar codes are part of this big mapping project developed by the Smithsonian Institution, Guelph University and The Canadian Wildlife Service. The work I conceived covers a wall of about 20 by 8 feet.



Thank you Mr. Burns. Bill Burns' installation Dogs, Boats and Airplanes will be on view at A.M. Richard beginning November 15th-December 21st. The gallery is located at 328 Berry Street (between South 4th and South 5th Street in Williamsburg).

