

CONVERSATION PIECE:

CLIFFORD OWENS
AND
CHRISTOPHER Y. LEW

CHRISTOPHER: The work of yours that people know best are the performances you did with artists like Carolee Schneemann and Joan Jonas while you were an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Why work with these artists, and how did the collaboration play out?

CLIFFORD: Actually, the first series of Studio Visits was done at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2004. The series was the result of how the institution was structured. I was in a position where I had to make work in a studio space and I hadn't had a studio for three or four years after coming out of the Whitney Independent Study Program. The artists-in-residence were going to make studio visits anyway since they were faculty and visiting artists. It was part of their contract with Skowhegan to conduct visits with the participants. So I invited to the studio the faculty artists who were there throughout the summer: Elaine Reichek, William Pope.L, Alix Pearlstein, Guillermo Kuitca, and Donald Moffett.

One thing that it was, was a conversation, a conversation piece. What is different with the Studio Visits at the Studio Museum in Harlem are the invited participants. I worked with Performa director RoseLee Goldberg to come up with a list of artists and art professionals who had a relationship to or interest in visual arts performance. I wanted to focus the visits a little bit more in terms of who the invited guests would be. We sent letters to a whole list of names and these are the people that responded, the people that are in these studio visits.

CHRISTOPHER: So you did something with everyone who replied positively?

CLIFFORD: Exactly. Once they agreed to do it, I wanted to make a work that would be related to their own interest in performance. In all the works about the body, there's a certain physicality and a certain kind of conversation—if

you think about it historically, if you think about Carolee Scheemann's work or Joan Jonas's work individually, but also as part of a whole period in recent art history. But that's not to say that this is an art-historical piece or a romantic, nostalgic look at these legendary artists' work. It's through my body. It wasn't a kind of re-staging or interpretation of their work.

CHRISTOPHER: It's something totally new.

CLIFFORD: Yes. There is not, at least from what I've seen or heard about, a piece in which Carolee Scheemann is rubbing a man's body with lotion.

I want to say it's about a conversation, because it is two artists coming together or an artist and art professional like you, like now we're having a conversation. It's a literal conversation, but there is a performance that's happening.

CHRISTOPHER: But this conversation is different than the Studio Visits, since those are conversations channeled through your body. And I think that is an important aspect.

CLIFFORD: Absolutely. Certainly there is a relation to that artist's practice, but it also relates to a whole conversation about the body.

CHRISTOPHER: I think it relates in particular to your body. There's a manipulation of your body that happens through almost all of them.

CLIFFORD: And that was a big part of the project. The pieces with Jesper Just and RoseLee Goldberg rarely get talked about. Jesper is videotaping me and at one point we're singing together, but I never made a video of it. There are only photographs. RoseLee is the same. We were really having a conversation in space and I just happened to be nude. She's sitting on the floor, looking at things. There's a lot that is left out of the photograph of me and RoseLee.

CHRISTOPHER: They are ambiguous photos in a way, but your naked presence is very charged and almost surreal. Everything seems so natural, but it happens that you don't have any clothes on. That shifts the energy.

CLIFFORD: Yes. The conversation was about an art historian being in a space with an artist who is talking about his work and using his body in a very explicit way.

CHRISTOPHER: And that connects back to what you did for Greater New York 2005 at P.S. 1.

CLIFFORD: That's *Tell Me What to Do with Myself*. I haven't talked much about that piece. A lot of people don't talk about it. It's a complicated piece and I don't feel that I'm finished with it.

CHRISTOPHER: You mean you'll be doing it again?

CLIFFORD: I would like to. A lot of intense things happened in that piece. There are things about it that I haven't resolved for myself. I think in another location it could be different, say in Germany. It reflects the place, the audience, and the energy. The performance came together at the same time as the Studio Visits in Skowhegan. I did the first version of it in 2004, and it was very different. But that first performance had a lot of energy, whoa.

CHRISTOPHER: I never saw the performance at P.S. 1, but I remember walking into the gallery with all the ephemera and objects. It was such a psychically-charged space where you could feel the actions and everything that was going on. There was something fucked up about it and scary. It was a very physical sensation when you see marks on the wall. And also sculptural in that you respond by walking around it and through it.

CLIFFORD: The audience had to lie down on the floor to look through a peephole and tell me what to do, or they could just look down at the video monitors. It certainly tries to make the audience aware of their bodies. I think that's one big thing that came out of it. What also happened with the piece is that it showed how groups function. Ultimately, they were performing for themselves.

CHRISTOPHER: And not for you?

CLIFFORD: Not necessarily. Maybe I was a conduit. I think that was another instance in which my body was being manipulated through language.

CHRISTOPHER: Going back to when you mentioned your residency at Skowhegan, it was by contract that the artists had to make studio visits. I think that word is interesting in the context of your performances. For the Studio Visits in Harlem, there was a sort of social contract in which the artists accepted the invitation and they had to do something with you, or at least show up. In a similar way during Greater New York, the audience was implicitly accountable for what they commanded you to do. They could tell you to do anything and you had to decide how far you would go in following the commands.

CLIFFORD: That was one thing that was terrifying about *Tell Me What to Do with Myself*. It revealed who people were. People don't necessarily honor the contract or the presumed agreement that "I will do no harm to you," "I will treat you humanely,"—and won't tell you to lick up your own piss or jerk off.

CHRISTOPHER: In both Studio Visits and *Tell Me What to Do with Myself*, your body is the medium, the material that is manipulated. Things get channeled through you. In *Text Piece*, it's language rather than the body that is manipulated.

CLIFFORD: That piece was hard to make, but also very important on many different levels. There are two works; one is a grid of forty-six video stills that represent each frame in the video, randomly arranged on the wall. Then there is the video of the forty-six stills set to music, from Björk to Jimmy Scott, and it repeats for one hour. The text remains the same, but the music changes. In other words, different pieces of music influence the text in different ways. So you're reading "She likes to finger my feelings" and you hear Björk's "Mouth's Cradle," and the next song that comes up is Prince's rendition of Jimmy Scott's "Nothing Compares 2U," and you read the same text. Like when you're watching the film, the music and titles affect your interpretation. It's playing on image, language, and music.

CHRISTOPHER: And the body, too.

CLIFFORD: Yeah, it's in the lines, "Your dick will take you far," "I thought you were gay," "Get away from me." It's a tough piece, but I think it's a personal piece. Do you think so?

CHRISTOPHER: Knowing you, I have to divorce a certain amount of what I know about you and just go with the artwork. But as you say, art and life go hand in hand, and even if the viewer doesn't know you or your biography, there's always something about the person behind work.

CLIFFORD: It's unclear throughout the piece who's speaking and to whom. I like how both the installation of stills functions and how the video functions. Yet, with the grid of text, you can enter it in a different way than the video. It's not time-based, and I like what's happening with that.

CHRISTOPHER: Let's speak about your recent performance, *Performance with an Audience*, which occurred at On Stellar Rays gallery in fall of 2008.

CLIFFORD: There was the performance and then there were the photographs made during the piece, which are called *Photographs with an Audience*. You were at the performance, so you have a sense of what happened. And you saw the installation, so you have seen the outcome of the actions and gestures that took place in front of the camera. *Photographs with an Audience* picks up where *Tell Me What to Do with Myself* leaves off because it's a project dealing with audience and relationships.

CHRISTOPHER: They both deal with a system of commands and instructions. There's even a part within the performance where you invite the audience to instruct you on how to pose for the camera.

CLIFFORD: Exactly. But I think *Photographs with an Audience* is more considerate of both photography and audience. This project is really about photography. I think it's so much more about photography than performance. You could say it's a performance-based piece.

CHRISTOPHER: How do you treat the performance and the photographs shown after the fact? They seem like two different works.

CLIFFORD: For the performance, I plan out what I want to do with the audience. I'm interested in what the outcome of all those commands will look like as photographs. The experience of the performance is much different since you're in the moment and part of the work itself. I think the photographs are more about the installation of the pictures and how they function as a discrete work of art. So there really are two works, the performance itself and the photographs. Clearly the photographs are more important than the performance.

CHRISTOPHER: Why is that?

CLIFFORD: The photographs have a life. If you weren't at the performance, how would you know if anything happened? They are equally important components to the project, but I think the photographs are doing something else due to the way they are installed. They embody the work in a much different way.

CHRISTOPHER: The pictures are clearly not a documentation of the performance.

CLIFFORD: Right, the photographs are highly constructed images. When you enter the space you are confronted with a big studio camera and lights.

When you come into the space, it is one dominated by photography.

CHRISTOPHER: To paraphrase how you introduced the piece, the performance was an excuse to make photographs with a group. In a way, it brings you full circle, since you studied photography long before working in video or performance.

CLIFFORD: I moved into video after working in photography because I was frustrated by the limits of photography. Then I became frustrated by the limits of video and moved to performance-based work. Of course, performance is limiting, too. So I'm always moving around. Pretty soon I'll just start painting. [Laughs]

CHRISTOPHER: Something like *Performance with an Audience* exploits those limitations. You end up talking about where one ends and about the space in between performance and photography. That's where the piece lives.

CLIFFORD: Yeah, we're all compelled to perform in front of a camera. Maybe that's how we were socialized or acculturated or whatever. I think that people unknowingly are always performing whenever a camera is present. The audience has an expectation of what's going to happen in the photograph. They're anticipating the moment when the shutter is released. They are anticipating that moment when the flash is going to go off.

CHRISTOPHER: And you're controlling all of these things.

CLIFFORD: Absolutely, absolutely. But I also want to make the audience part and parcel of what is theoretically this special moment that we believe photography to be. ■■

