



## A Just Noticeable Difference

### Kenny Berger and Juli Carson in Conversation

**J** *As in your previous work, your installation for Room Gallery springs from a childhood memory that's meant to evoke a larger theoretical or cultural percept. This time your "screen memory" entails the notion of a "family double." Maybe we should begin with the memory's initial event.*

**K** In 1984, on a bus ride to school, I heard that a neighbor, Lenny Berg, was arrested trying to illegally ship arms to Poland. The Bergs were family friends who lived on the opposite side of our apartment building. My brother and I went to school with their kids, our families went on ski trips together, etc. So when Lenny – who worked in the security business – got caught on the Poland deal, it was strange for a lot of reasons, beginning with the fact that the Polish government (the ostensible recipient of the arms) had access to all the military supplies it needed from the Soviet Union. This issue was never really explained, but at trial there was speculation that Poland was actually a way station, and the real destination for the shipment was the Middle East.

**J** *How odd...*

**K** ...In any case, it turned out that Poland was just the tip of the iceberg and Lenny was charged with more, including attempts to illegally ship arms to the Soviet Union, Argentina, and Iraq. The only successful effort was the 1982 deal that sent arms to Argentina during the Falklands War. During the trial, Lenny claimed to have been working covertly for the US Defense Intelligence Agency, but there was no evidence of that, and so he and his partners were convicted and went to prison. Whether or not there was a governmental connection, though, is really irrelevant to the extent that he was motivated strictly by profit and not by ideology; whatever else, this was a case of pure greed.

**J** *What was your family's reaction?*

**K** For my parents, part of what was so disturbing was the fact that here was an observant Jew – a pro-Israeli believer who regularly went to synagogue – who was selling guns to Arab countries. He'd actually already been doing this for some time legally, and

when my father confronted him about it, Lenny's dismissive response was "If I don't do it someone else will." What strikes me now about all of this is how uncanny the experience was. On the surface of things, the Bergs and my family were living remarkably parallel "middle class" lives. But beyond what we could see, Lenny was enmeshed in this unimaginable world of greed and violence.

**J** *So this is where the concept of the "family double" comes up, which relates to the title of the show: A Just Noticeable Difference.*

**K** Yes, the idea of the "double" – or the operation of doubling – defines the project's structural logic in terms of content, the organization of the space, the formal approach in both the video and audio, and so on. As you point out, this doubling is conceptually visible in terms of the Berg family's relation to my own. But in the project it's also *physically* visible in a number of ways...in the spectator's encounter with his or her mirror image, in the dividing of the gallery into symmetrical spaces of projection, in the way that the two projections reflect each other, and so on. And doubling – like all repetition – also produces difference. So it's this kind of conception of difference that the title is meant to invoke. Specifically, a "just noticeable difference" is a term associated with Gustav Fechner and 19<sup>th</sup> century psychophysics. The term refers to the minimum change in sensory input that a given test subject is able to detect perceptually. It's a purely statistical measurement that expresses our subjectively and situationally determined capacity to perceive difference.

**J** *On a theoretical note, you've long been interested in debates concerning the role that aesthetics plays in politics. I'm thinking of the debates between Guy Debord and Louis Althusser or Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard. I guess these are more instances of irreconcilable "doubling"?*

**K** Right, or mirroring. I think my interest in the concept of two seemingly opposed things mirroring or doubling each other is part of the reason I continually find myself drawn to the debates you mention. Thus, to the degree that one of the principal concerns of these debates is the political effect that a particular aesthetic strategy has on its audience, I think there's a basic dilemma that we have to contend with. Should the aim of that strategy be to direct our attention to a given political reality and in turn affect

political consciousness? Or should the aim instead be to upset and call into crisis our idea of what reality *is*? If it's the latter position that someone identifies with more – and that's the case with me – then that position still has to engage deconstructively with some sort of representation of reality. So in this sense the issue, as you imply, isn't the reconciliation of an opposition between, say, a humanist Marxist perspective and its inverted Structuralist "mirror" image, but rather it's the process of working paradoxically *within* that space of opposition.

**J** *This brings up the so-called irreconcilable difference between Marxism and psychoanalysis, an historical opposition that has more of a hold in contemporary art today than it has in recent years... certainly more than it did in the 80s or 90s. Post-9-11, so much "political" art is realist in the most pictorial sense. I'm thinking of those artists who make drawings of historical political rallies or collages of archival revolutionary documents, all of which is very flat-footedly Marxist. A more abstract approach to political content is still around, but it's in the minority. I don't mean "abstract" as in black paintings. I mean it in a non-literalist, psychoanalytic way. Working at the crossroads of Marxist and psychoanalytic theory, all the artists we've featured in Room Gallery since 2004 could be seen as making "abstract history art" – a play on words in the context of traditional non-abstract history painting.*

**K** Well, that formulation's interesting because I think this project gave me a chance to think about longstanding questions that have to do with representation and the way that works of art have some relation to a reality that they allegorize, represent, negate, or otherwise allude to. But at the same time, as we've been talking about, there's a limit to our relation to reality. So in this context psychoanalysis is useful in helping recognize how that relation to reality – and also to history – is not only, in Althusser's terms, "imaginary", but also, in the broadest psychoanalytic sense, mediated. So if I don't want to give up on staking out a critical position vis-à-vis reality and history – and if at the same time part of the goal here is trying to unravel how we understand reality and history – then the place to start has to be my own desire for

political and historical consciousness. Attempting to account for that necessarily undercuts a realist position. Not only because our reality is abstract (in the Marxist sense) but also because we can't help abstracting and reconstituting the reality we find ourselves caught in.

**J** *The film and video you've "detoured" in this work – Bertolucci's *The Conformist*, ABC News's account of the Lenny Berg affair, along with more recent documentary footage – puts into play another interest of yours...deconstructing the opposition between "fiction" and "documentary" as genres. This has long been the concern of such "new historicists" as Michel Foucault, Joel Fineman and Stephen Greenblatt, but it's also a concern recently revived in writings by Jacques Rancière.*

**K** Yes, this connects to what we've been talking about in that both fiction and documentary have a problematic status in relation to reality. To the extent that documentary as a genre fabricates the reality that it wants, the genre of fiction, for its part, obviously can't escape bringing back some element of the reality it claims to "negate" or depart from. So what this suggests is that both fiction and non-fiction have the capacity to confront a given audience with something that resists being recognized as either conventionally real or clearly imaginary. And if, in turn, each of these two genres can be mobilized as the repressed term of the other, then a space surfaces in which the difference between what we perceive as reality and what we take to be fictional begins to dissolve. Just as it does, for instance, in an "uncanny" encounter with one's double. So it's in the service of attempting to set up this kind of *confrontation* that the film and video footage utilized here has been appropriated or "detoured."

**J** *Again, the face-off between these parallel worlds of fiction and documentary is allegorical in that it stands for another face-off between two historical moments: the 30s (the root of the Cold War) and the 80s (the Cold War's last chapter). Of course today, post-9-11, the pathos of the Cold War has been displaced to the Middle East. So your own childhood memory, recalled for this work, is a kind of collective primal scene for the rest of us.*

**K** It sounds like you're describing something like a relay or repetition of "primal scenes" (the 30s for the Cold War, the 80s for our present moment, etc.) and I think that's a very productive way of getting at how my childhood memory of the Lenny Berg incident might be understood to operate. To begin with, clearly this memory was formative for me in very specific ways. But at the same time, it can be linked both metonymically and literally to any number of events in the 1980s that appear, from the vantage point of the present, to have set the stage for or given birth to the post-Cold War world. From our retrospective position, then, it's difficult not to see the Cold War as holding back or containing a whole range of problems that were waiting for opportunities to assert themselves. And this includes, particularly in some areas of American policy during the last eight years, some startling (maybe even uncanny) repetitions of the 1930s. So looking back, the moment of the 1980s signals an end to the Cold War that – far from initiating the end of history – has in fact led either to the proliferation of the

same ideas or a return of what was repressed during the Cold War. And it's perhaps in this broad sense that the memory of a neighbor who in the 1980s tried to illegally sell arms to Poland, Russia, Argentina, and Iraq can now serve as a primal scene for the strange post-Cold War and post-September 11th world that we now inhabit.

**J** *Listening to you, I'm struck by how non-regional this all is... how your concerns connect you to a number of key international artists working today. I'm specifically mindful that you and I are corresponding on this interview while I'm in Buenos Aires researching the contemporary resurgence of political "anti-happenings" that originally took place here in 1966. The Argentine artist Roberto Jacoby, who was a leader of these happenings, along with the Lacanian conceptual artist Oscar Masotta, is central to a younger generation of artists interested in interrogating the history of the neo-avant-garde through the "looking glass" of Marxism and psychoanalysis. They've had their own struggles with atrocious historical events, one of which you led this interview with. I'm speaking of the Falklands War, which finally ended Argentina's internal "Dirty War" of the military dictatorship, a genocidal junta that lasted from 1976-1983. So you see you have fellow travelers in far away places!*

**K** Well that's good to hear. And this comes back again to the idea of shared historical identifications that function as primal scenes. Because for the generation of artists that you're talking about – members, more or less, of my generation – the persistent drive to return to the neo-avant-garde practices of the 1960s has been increasingly met with a political consciousness shaped by almost two decades of post-Cold War emphasis on internationalism and global interdependence. And this has led, I think, to more and more concern that we recognize the multiple ways that the positions we occupy mirror or parallel a range of other positions occupied across the globe. But this also creates, in turn, an imperative that we not fail to engage more fully with the differences – whether substantial or just noticeable – that arise from the particularity of our experiences and that, though not always directly, continue to bring political conflicts to bear on each of us in our everyday lives.

Kenny Berger

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