

Dennis Oppenheim: A Mysterious Point of Entry

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Carolee Thea interviews Dennis Oppenheim in Venice

Dennis Oppenheim has been a pioneering artist in conceptualism, land art, body art, video, and sculpture since the late 1960s. He is most interested in imperfect and chaotic manifestations of dialogue and tension, danger and discomfort. His work references the mind, the body, and the sensory shell as avenues of description as well as states of being. Possessing a demonic irony, his work rests uncomfortably between humor and terror, a middle ground inhabited by Oppenheim as an arena for continuous self-transformation, a process that causes his work to resist labels like neo-Dada or Pop. His new work addresses public space through his manipulation of familiar architectural icons. As usual, Oppenheim, shaman, reformer, showman, and trickster, wordlessly initiates a philosophical discourse with his audience.

The recent Oppenheim exhibition sponsored by the Venice Biennale was shown in Marghera, the port city of the island of Mestre, about 10 minutes from Venice via vaporetto. As visitors approach Marghera, an apparition like a part of New Jersey arises, crowded with processing bins and other modernist implements of a polluting industrial economy. Within this bleak landscape rises the temporary Teatro Fenice, a large tent-like structure replacing the burned-out opera house of Venice. The island's factories are virtually abandoned except for recycled spaces, including the Pilkington glass factory, which was filled with Oppenheim's works of the last 10 years, 40 of them. Alone in the rear courtyard was "Device to Root out Evil" (1997), a 25-foot, tilted, upside-down, New England-style church.

Carolee Thea: How has this context of Marghera, Venice, or the factory building, informed your work?

Dennis Oppenheim: For the past 30 years there have been occasions where the context has informed my work, if not literally created the foundation for it. A couple of years ago, I showed work in a World War II bunker in Munich, and the architectural setting almost demanded certain works and not others. In this case, I was asked to be a guinea pig, in an experimental gesture made between Germano Celant, the curator of the Biennale, and the present mayor of the city. Their objective was to bring art to the people living outside of Venice, in the community of Marghera. This culturally starved area would then compete with the overly culturally rich Venice. Not being Italian, I could not appreciate this gesture perhaps as much as the local inhabitants. But the general blueprint of turning abandoned industrial spaces into permanent exhibition facilities has a considerable historical precedent. You can imagine how difficult it is, however, to compete with Venice proper, a center of tremendous cultural life, compared to Marghera, an industrial wasteland.

Thea: "Device to Root out Evil", the church sculpture with its steeple thrust into the ground, is the only outdoor work. It is an interesting ploy to turn a familiar object upside-down, stimulating a viewer to reexamine preconceived notions of its nature and meaning. It conjures up associations of religious turmoil: 16th-century Italy, the Holocaust, war in the former Yugoslavia, or Christian fundamentalism in America. Have personal religious conceptions inspired the work?

Oppenheim: That piece, initially called Church, was proposed to the Public Art Fund in the city of New York to be built last year on Church Street, where I live. The director thought it was too controversial, and felt it would stimulate a lot of negative reaction from the Church and the religious population. I then changed the title to "Device to Root out Evil", to sidestep unwanted focus on ambient content. It's a very simple gesture that's made here, simply turning something upside-down. One is always looking for a basic gesture in sculpture, economy of

gesture: it is the simplest, most direct means to a work. Turning something upside-down elicits a reversal of content and pointing a steeple into the ground directs it to hell as opposed to heaven.

Thea: Are you saying that your work evolves only from basic gestures? What about contemporary theory, or the artist's psychology, or materials, or cultural motifs as sources? What is the ultimate binding agent in this diverse assembly of works?

Oppenheim: The binding agent is the continued intoxication I receive by using art to target itself, to interrogate itself. I know this art for art's sake position can be elitist, but I am simply talking about what, out of the multitude of positions an artist can take, is the most challenging. On the journey of directing art towards itself, one can always find adjacent content to pull in, so as you're deconstructing you're also constructing something, hopefully with a less naive foundation. The superficial layering of form/content, without a rich and inspired internal drive, will always have disappointing results. It is uncomfortable to pressure oneself to dig towards each work, to try and penetrate something. It gives you a headache. And there is no guarantee you will build inspiration along the way. But resting on your laurels and simply reiterating what you already know is a waste of your life, even if you invented it in the first place. Art should be what we don't know.

Thea: The systems of conceptualism which began in the late '60s, and in which you were an important player, are significant in understanding the diversity of your work and further colors its history.

Oppenheim: The doors opened by early conceptual art led to a rich field of uses; however, often artists were captured and corralled into small places within this field. I've always wanted to operate within the entire arena. Signature style has been suspicious to me; it reads as a limitation.

Thea: Many of the works here in Marghera were previously exhibited at the Joseph Helman Gallery in New York, where "Sleeping Dogs" (1997) and "Back to Back (Belly to Belly)" (1997), were exhibited next to each other. Separated in Marghera, their impact was weakened, somewhat, but the sexual innuendo and the original imprint resonated. "Sleeping Dogs" consists of a group of six-foot frankfurters lying around a campfire and encased in sleeping bags. In "Back to Back (Belly to Belly)" we see two torsos roasting, impaled on a turning spit to the tune of the Kingston Trio singing "back to back, belly to belly, I don't give a damn, if I've done it already." The work rings like a male bonding ritual. We are so aware today of the legacy of violence against women, and even though you have said that the torsos were originally male underwear mannequins, it seems that most viewers interpret them as female, isn't this an offensive statement in this era?

Oppenheim: I am not a political artist. The gender issues taken up in art discourse are valid, but have never won my attention. They seem superficial. Spinning torsos, perhaps, confuse some viewers. They are male torsos, asked to reference mountains and valleys as they turn, displaying their backs and fronts. Also the line in the song, "back to back, belly to belly," is really about what I've mentioned before: it's satire, targeting signature style.

Thea: Do you think the artist has to be responsible for the audience's interpretation?

Oppenheim: The audience is too diverse to get a general consensus. I think many artists secretly address only a small number of people, they probably want to win the more powerful and influential portions of the art world. The general public is not as important to many artists as the media. But it is always inspiring to see some artists break out from the force of influential critics and appeal to larger forces found in a public arena. Some works, however, can mislead the viewer. It is an outcome of multiple meanings. In "Sleeping Dogs", there is the appearance of sexual content. These large hotdogs fit into the sleeping bags almost as if they were made for them. But these images come through the back door, not overtly or heavyhandedly. Putting hotdogs inside sleeping bags came out of an imagistic dream, an associational flow of forces that were extremely mysterious.

Thea: Are you talking about a romanticized place, where the artist can't articulate associations?

Oppenheim: Well, I do think you have to articulate, but at the same time I think we have to

reinforce process. If you lead yourself into the work through the intellect, and with cold, analytical, premeditated objectives, the work is never going to succeed. The entry into the work has to be a double-faced combination of sensory-intellectual flow. I mean, if I had this idea of hotdogs and sleeping bags (like condoms), grouped around a fire, this would be a cold and uninspired entry. The way to get good art is to discover it in a lofty, off-the-ground assemblage of images that you can hardly see and then you pull them in. I don't know everything about these sleeping dogs; they're strange. They are supposed to be strange, art is supposed to be even stranger to the artist.

Thea: The works called "Buildings Poking Their Eyes Out" (1997) are like a vision of the future; like a Rem Koolhaas line-up of shanties, a post-apocalyptic Levittown.

Oppenheim: With this work I am pushing myself into the arena of public art. Not that I am flooded with ideas or inspiration, or that I know the future as we approach the millennium. I am trying to find an alternative to museums and galleries-but knowing that public art has always been a bittersweet and disappointing context over the last 20 years. It really has produced some of the worst sculpture in the world.

Thea: Have you made any of it?

Oppenheim: Probably. It's a receptacle for bad art. What it offers an artist is an excruciating interaction with bureaucrats and overseers who invariably make a good work impossible. It aligns the artists with architects, who are often resistant, and puts the artist into a no-win position of impossible problems. One must develop a new kind of thinking process in order to interface with the power structure of public art successfully. I believe there is a way to do it but it has to be a kind of invention. I believe there are some artists, quasi-architects, who are availed with this sort of weird invention, a way of entry, a way of sidestepping all the problems. The pieces I showed are like catalytic components that hopefully want to draw me into a discourse with this arena that I am describing.

Thea: Will these works be collaborations with an architect?

Oppenheim: I think it is dangerous for artists to get too close to architects. You can be seduced by them. Their art is more limited-architects have considerable social requirements-though secretly many would like to shed their restrictions. If you bring in architects to help you, be careful: they have a way of socializing everything, which often compromises the art coefficient. It is important to keep doing serious studio work. I have asked Cella Imrey, an architect, to help me with the structure of a large work that is being built in Lithuania, at the Europos Parkas. You can enter it, but it is angled like the church piece.

Thea: I have references in my head, but I don't want to impose them.

Oppenheim: The fewer fixed associations the viewer has, the more that can be received from the work. By leaving the nails out, instead of nailing something to the ground, you can allow an associational stream that is more conducive to good art. When I see good art, it's art that doesn't have all the nails pounded in.

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