

Creative Dialogues: Dianne Pearce's Production of Relational Possibilities

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Let us consider two important factors at play in the artwork of Dianne Pearce, the two poles that Marcel Duchamp argues in “The Creative Act” are integral to the creation of art: the artist and the spectator (138-140). Duchamp draws attention to the division of labour that separates the creator of ‘art’ from its receiver, who is commonly perceived as encountering the already completed artwork through a passive act of spectatorship. When examined closely, this distinction of roles fails to live up to even the most basic artistic experience, such as viewing a painting or sculpture or architectural space, each being irrevocably related to the history of its own reception. Experiencing the *Mona Lisa*, to cite a famous example, is directly related to one’s appreciation and knowledge of the work, as well as the environment in which the image is viewed—be it in the Louvre or on a postcard. As Duchamp makes clear, the role played by the viewers of an artwork must be seen as part of an active dialogue *with* the work, the result of this interaction representing the final act in the creative process.

This dialogic understanding of the artist/spectator relationship forms what I argue is the basis of Pearce’s artistic practice. “As an artist, I envision myself as a producer rather than an author: I encourage a relational encounter between visitors and the work,” Pearce tells us in an artist statement. This preference of being a ‘producer’ rather than an ‘author’ of artworks is significant because through this distinction she is highlighting the role played by the spectator, who for Pearce functions as the very site of the work’s potential. Within her work she is, in a Duchampian manner, turning the traditional author-function of the artist upside down in order to

encourage an active exchange with spectators. This can be seen in *Vast Regions of Domain* (2005) where the artist has re-produced a series of 10 newsprint flyers posted to the gallery wall, from which visitors are literally invited to “take one”. Here, Pearce presents her art as a gift to both the viewer and the world outside the gallery space into which the flyers enter, thanks to the dialogic actions of spectators. What exactly is the difference being suggested by this shift in the artist’s role? If the artist claims total authority over the work created, all that is left for the viewer is to receive the monologic statement of the author, the meaning of which is simply accepted or rejected. If, however, the artist produces a work that is specifically intended as a meeting point with spectators, the result is a possibility of cultural dialogue in which what one sees is open to interpretation—each new encounter, Mikhail Bakhtin tells us, revealing “ever newer ways to mean” (346).

We can visualize the dialogic encounter between artist and spectator through the art object with the help of Pearce’s *Stammer and Rustle* (2006-07). The artwork consists of white porcelain letters that spell out a long sentence in Spanish, installed in a large spiral on the floor with ample room for viewers to walk the path formed by the space separating the rows. Here we are confronted with language on a bodily level, in which reading (if one *can* read the language) involves physical interaction. This work—which is reminiscent of the turning spirals of words seen in Duchamp’s film *Anémic cinema* (1926)—invites us to walk the trail of language established by the artist until we reach the incoherent jumble of letters at the centre, at which point we, in a labyrinthine gesture, turn back on ourselves in order to make the return journey out of the installation. Similar to the tradition of walking a labyrinth, the act of egressing *Stammer and Rustle* is not simply a retracing of one’s steps but instead marks a new beginning based on the added experience of the encounter itself.

This process can be more generally seen as a metaphor for the relational dialogue made possible through works of art, one in which the parameters established by the artist are negotiated and ultimately redefined by individual spectators through their engagement with the work. The potential of an artwork is ultimately based not on the role of the artist alone (who “may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius” without avail) but instead results from the artist’s ability to incite a response in spectators through the work they produce (Duchamp 138). In other words, it is not simply the construct of *Stammer and Rustle* as we enter it but also what we take out of the experience that makes up Pearce’s work.

This dialogic relationship is literalized in *Polyphonic Novel* (2006-07), an installation that locates viewers in a schoolroom-like environment where they are given the space and materials to produce images that ultimately constitute the project. Here, more than virtually any of her other works, we can see Pearce’s pedagogical interests—from her roles as a professor and museum educator—manifest in her artistic practice. Upon entering this installation each spectator becomes a student of the process established by the artist: sitting down at one of the provided tables, choosing from the rubber stamps (bearing images taken from the Webster’s Dictionary) made available in bins on the tables, stamping the images onto sheets of paper that can then be displayed on bulletin boards in the exhibition space. Discussing Pearce’s artistic strategies, Aurora Noreña states: “The participation of the spectator and the inquiry of his or her distinct level of involvement in the process of finishing of the works are the artist’s principle concerns” (7). In the end, Pearce helps produce (rather than author) the work, which, as the Bakhtinian-inspired title suggests, represents a type of *novel* or cultural text created out of the many voices of the spectators who participate.

Pearce extends this engagement with participatory encounters in *Indisciplined Meetings* (2010), an installation presented along side *Polyphonic Novel* in her 2010 exhibition *Tusovchiks: Indisciplined Meetings* at Red Head Gallery in Toronto. This newer project plays upon the parameters of its earlier counterpart, in which images from the same source as the stamps (Webster's Dictionary) are presented in a set of 10 ready-made colouring pads, each containing black and white illustrations with accompanying English and Spanish words for which the images serve as referents. Stacked for visitors to take, these didactic handouts can be brought to a table within the gallery and the imagery coloured in using crayons, again provided by the artist. The spectator's contribution in this case goes beyond material production and includes the act of meeting and engaging with fellow spectators. Playing off the concept of *Tusovka*, a Russian term described in the back of each of the handouts as referencing "a free and open space in which people can meet," Pearce establishes the space of the gallery as a site for meeting, with her artwork as the catalyst that brings people together. In this manner, *Polyphonic Novel* and *Indisciplined Meetings* consist not only in the conditions established by the artist, but also and more importantly in the collected activities and products of the individual spectators openly participating in the project.

Within her works, Pearce situates herself as a producer and facilitator of cultural dialogues, a role based within her approach to art as a language. Returning to the visuals of *Stammer and Rustle*, we can again see how her use of language necessitates engagement and encourages us to both learn from and play with the elements we encounter in her work. "A dialogue of languages is a dialogue of social forces perceived not only in their static co-existence, but also as a dialogue of different times, epochs and days, a dialogue that is forever dying, living, being born," Bakhtin tells us (365). It is our role as spectators that is on display in

Pearce's work, which functions as a meeting place where we each (in our own way) untangle these various social forces and make them part of our world.

References

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