

EACH STORY TOLD IS AN ACT OF SHAPING THE WORLD.

Completely fantastical narratives are obviously the invention of an imagined world, but narratives rooted in the real world are deeply subjective as well. In the omission or inclusion of various details, in the tenor of delivery, the storyteller finds his or her own reality within the larger frame of our collective reality. **Bending the Word** brings together four artists who actively reinterpret larger shared narratives, from ancient fables and religious texts to official histories and current events. They do so by commingling fact and fiction, recovering lost histories, inserting the deeply personal and anecdotal, connecting disparate narratives, or collapsing time and space. Their acts of story-telling run counter to dominant narratives, weaving new meanings, opening up critiques, and making space for the multivalence of individual experience. In their own way, each of these approaches inflects a documentary sensibility with deep subjectivity, revisioning the world. These kinds of pointed narratives make known the machinations of imagination and analysis, and the relationships of concrete truths and abstract notions. Each of these artists shows us how an official account or a straight view of the world can be bent to prismatic effect. Ultimately a story lives beyond its telling, in the minds of its hearers or viewers, who carry it forward, twist and turn it, and make it something new for themselves.

Martha Colburn's truly fantastical filmic collages layer found and original imagery into animations that rarely feature words, but are so densely packed with colliding and combining fragments that the narrative advances visually. She has said that working with animation allows for seeing the unseen, and her collage techniques maximize the subversive potential of juxtaposition with wit and bite. *Myth Labs* (2008) marries biblical imagery, the current war on drugs, and U.S. social history to weave a parable on poverty, vice, drug abuse, and power; to "visualize fear, paranoia, faith, salvation, and loss of faith." Conflating the American myth with meth labs, Colburn begins the film with the figure of Jesus leading devout Puritans to American shores, and jumps to the present, employing methamphetamine addiction as a symbolic cipher for the ills of American society. Colburn makes parallels between the wilderness of newly



MARTHA COLBURN

discovered America and the wasteland of contemporary America, and the search for escape from the void in both environments. The Puritans sought salvation through religion and a physical escape from their homeland; meth addicts seek it through drugs and the metaphorical escape they provide.

Narratives of past and present intermingle as Colburn collapses Puritan and addict in this political fable. Both are positions of fervor, positions of obsessive intensity in relation to their chosen addiction. The new inhabitants pray to visions of Jesus, and addicts are felled by epic meth lab explosions; Puritans engage in warfare with Native Americans, while methheads are attacked by police. Meth is known as a sexless drug, and its speedy effects mirror the acceleration of labor and productivity that is at the core of the myth of the American Dream. Colburn suggests that a certain kind of puritanism runs rampant today, albeit in the guise of the recent conservative backlash. Such psychological and moral parallels are embedded within Colburn's canny visual parallels, psychedelically complex and obsessive layerings that require Colburn's own fanatical effort to produce.

Patricia Esquivias plays with the conventions of explanatory narrative in the presentation of certain "facts." The *Folklore* videos are carefully constructed lectures, combining visual evidence, in the form of photographs, hand-drawn charts, and ephemera, with Esquivias's own voice-over connecting the disparate parts. These lo-fi PowerPoints, with their casual scrapbook aesthetics and Esquivias's halting delivery, belie the intentionality of the artist's found or forced connections. *Folklore I* connects two unlikely events: a forty-eight-hour rave, called "Destroy Route," and a bet over eating twenty fried eggs in one sitting. Esquivias sets their grand shared context in twentieth-century Spain, grounding us with a simple lesson in 100 years of Spanish history, from monarchy to republic to civil war to dictatorship back to monarchy. Then she narrates an ongoing series of digressions that connect politics, scandal, soccer, swear words, horses, fried eggs, dance parties, paella, folk crafts, and drugs. There's never a definitive connection between the two events, but the strung-together series of anecdotes, facts, and pictures touches on recurring themes of modern Spanish culture, a collision of verifiable facts, folk traditions, and personal and collective memory. Esquivias is writing her own hyper-subjective, narrowly focused, twelve-minute history of Spain, challenging the notion that history and culture are best understood through major events, or that their construction is determined by some "authority."

PATRICIA ESQUIVIAS



Folklore II connects two figures who brought Spain to global dominance—Phillip II, ruler of Spain during its empire-building in the sixteenth century, illustrated by a hand-colored map of the empire; and Julio Iglesias, who in the 1970s conquered the world with his romantic ballads, as illustrated by a hand-colored map of his fan base. Esquivias uses their shared rhetoric of sun and gold to liken them, but again, the series explains aspects of Spanish culture that remain in the collective consciousness, not chronicled in official histories. Knitting together trivial events, presumably but not verifiably true, her narrative is again continuous, suggesting that any figure can be connected to another by subjective association, and belying the flexible filter of "reality" through which any narrative is constructed.

Olivia Plender researches obscure historical moments, producing comics, installations, performances, and videos that chronicle the intersection of social movements and individual agency. Plender is interested in telling stories, but also questioning how historical narratives are socially constructed. Of particular interest are nonconformist religions, including the Modern Spiritualist Movement, founded almost accidentally by sisters Katy and Maggie Fox when the hijinx they devised to fool their superstitious mother into believing their house was haunted brought other believers to their upstate New York home.



OLIVIA PLENDER



The Foxes gained great fame as spirit mediums in communication with the dead, at a time when the fashions for magnetic healing, fortune-telling, phrenology, and other arts of the ineffable were in full bloom. Spiritual seeking took many forms, and these alternative practices, in opposition to the dominant social order, offered, as the artist says, "a means of challenging existing hierarchies of knowledge." Modern Spiritualists, Mesmerists, Swedenborgians, and others questioned received ideas about organized religion, and by extension society, and espoused communal and humanistic views in response to increasing industrialization and urbanization. Quite naturally these spiritual leaders were often involved in radical social reform of the day, from abolitionism to women's rights.

Spirit mediums existed at the intersection of the esoteric and the popular, and female figures like Emma Hardinge Britten, who popularized the movement in Britain, used her platform as a medium to transgress social boundaries and speak out on political issues. Plender employs a populist vocabulary to narrate Modern Spiritualism's incomplete story, a modern myth told from fragments. She conjures her own ghosts, in objects such as the folkish painted banner that memorializes the obscure heroes of Modern Spiritualism, or the comic book that relates anecdotally the persecution of outspoken mediums with outmoded witchcraft laws. A small library presents the artist's research as an amateur historian of the movement, further narrating how these fringe belief systems are embedded in a larger social fabric, and how faith, revolt, performance,



TRIS VONNA-MICHELL

reason, revelation, and the unknown commingle and overlap. The installation tells many stories, reclaiming obscure histories, but doing so by channeling the Spiritualists' own ethic of anti-didacticism, offering multiple narratives that challenge the authority of any single account.

Tris Vonna-Michell's performances capitalize on the energy of a live situation to shape each telling and retelling of a narrative. Repetition and infinite iterating quite literally acknowledge the fugitive quality of the spoken word, in all its open-endedness and malleability. *hahn/huhn*, evolving since 2004, is delivered rapidly and densely, with slides, photographs, and props, to weave intricate fusions and confusions of identity in the biographies of three individuals in postwar Germany: Reinhold Hahn; Reinhold Huhn; and Otto Hahn. Vonna-Michell follows the story from a 2003 phone call when he first became aware of the men, to Berlin, where "in an attempt to verify or perhaps simply connect these fragments and seemingly unrelated histories . . . asking locals and visiting museums, monuments, wastelands, and architecture, I started collecting details, which I hoped would find their place in my own story, the unraveling of the hahn and huhn." These figures intersect with modern mythmaking about secret tunnels under the Anhalter Bahnhof in Berlin, perhaps employed as Nazi headquarters. His delivery is intense, at times clearly articulated, at times a blur

of staccato rhythm, producing the effect of an aural collage of representative passages juxtaposed with abstract fields of sound. But the narratives are there, advancing forward, curling back onto themselves to repeat, growing exponentially, their fragmentation suggesting some aleatory impulse. By the end one realizes they instead follow a logic of coincidences, discovered or invented, between facts and fictions, present and past, anecdote and personal experience.

Vonna-Michell's live performances are extended through installations that combine sound, image, and objects to allow visitors to guide their own alternate narration of his chosen subjects. The installations are often sites for the live performance, or for on-demand storytelling via telephone, but they also exist, as here, with recorded sound layered over ambient noise to add complexity to his monologue. The treatment of images mirrors his vocal delivery, challenging our capacity for resolution and comprehension—still images are grainy reproductions, and slide projections advance at a rapid clip, almost faster than we can really see. In both live performance and installation he engages with the complex relationship between resolution and dissolution of form and content, sound and image, narrative and structure.

Elizabeth Thomas

PHYLLIS WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR

MARTHA COLBURN has exhibited at Frankfurter Kunstverein; The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Centre Pompidou, Paris; The Kitchen, New York; Rosenbach Museum & Library, Philadelphia; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Strasbourg; *8th Baltic Triennial of International Art*, Vilnius; and P.S.1 Center for Contemporary Art, New York. Screenings of her work have occurred at the Pacific Film Archive, UC Berkeley; Harvard Film Archive; Museum of Art and Design, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Serpentine Gallery, London; and numerous international film festivals, including Cannes, Rotterdam, London, San Francisco, Sundance, and the New York Underground Film Festival. She contributed animated passages to the film *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*, and has created music videos for Deerhoof, Serj Tankian, Friendly Rich, and They Might Be Giants. Born in 1971, Colburn lives and works in New York. She received her B.F.A. from Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, and her M.A. equivalent from Rijksakademie Van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam.

PATRICIA ESQUIVIAS recently exhibited at the Royal College of Art Galleries, London; White Columns, New York; *5th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art*; and Frankfurter Kunstverein. Recent screenings include Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Spain; Sannio Contemporary Art Museum, Italy; Museo Nacional Reina Sofia, Madrid; and ATA, San Francisco. Upcoming exhibitions include *Salon of the Revolution* at The Croatian Association of Artists (HDLU), Zagreb; Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck, Tyrol; and Mains d'Œuvres, Paris. Born in 1979 in Venezuela, Esquivias lives and works in Guadalajara, Mexico. She received her B.A. from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London; attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture; and completed her M.F.A. at California College of the Arts, San Francisco.

OLIVIA PLENDER has had solo exhibitions at Art in General, New York, where she was also artist-in-residence; Marabou Parken, Stockholm; and Frankfurter Kunstverein. Recently her work has been presented in group exhibitions at Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; Frankfurter Kunstverein; The Drawing Room, London; The Power Plant, Toronto; Tate Britain, London; *Athens Biennial*; *Moscow Biennial*; Auckland Art Gallery, New Zealand; *Tate Triennial*, London; *Busan Biennial*, South Korea; Serpentine Gallery, London; *Beck's Futures*; Iaspis, Stockholm; *IX Baltic Triennale of International Art*, Vilnius; P.S.1 Center for Contemporary Art, New York; and Whitechapel Gallery, London. Plender has worked with Canal, a project-based collaboration involving artists and designers, and is founder and co-editor of *Untitled Magazine*. Born in 1977, Plender lives and works in London. She received her B.A. from Central St. Martins School of Art, London.

TRIS VONNA-MICHELL has had solo exhibitions at Kunsthalle Zurich; Kunstverein Braunschweig, Germany; Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam; and BOZAR, Palais des Beaux-Arts/Palais voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels. Group exhibitions include Tate Britain, London; *The 3rd Yokohama Triennale*, Japan; *Experiment Marathon*; Reykjavik Art Museum and Serpentine Gallery; *5th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art*; Neue Alte Brücke, Frankfurt; De Hallen, Haarlem; and Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern. Born in 1982, Vonna-Michell lives and works in London, Southend-on-Sea, and Berlin. He received his B.A. from Glasgow School of Art and did graduate study at Hochschule für Bildende Künste/Städelschule, Frankfurt.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Performance by Tris Vonna-Michell

Sunday, September 28, 3 p.m.
Museum Theater
Reception follows in the Bancroft Lobby.

Film screening with Martha Colburn

Tuesday, December 2, 7:30 p.m.
PFA Theater

An Evening of Confabulations with Kevin Killian and special guests

Saturday, January 31, 7 p.m.
Museum Theater

The MATRIX Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis.

Additional donors to the MATRIX Program include the UAM Council MATRIX Endowment, Jane and Jeffrey Green, Joachim and Nancy Bechtle, Rena Bransten, Maryellen and Frank Herring, Noel and Penny Nellis, James Pick and Rosalyn Laudati, Barclay and Sharon Simpson, Roselyne C. Swig, Paul L. Wattis III, Penelope Cooper and Rena Rosenwasser, Paul Rickert, and other generous donors.

PICTURED

Martha Colburn: Still from *Myth Labs*, 2008; 16mm film animation, 7 min.; courtesy of the artist.

Patricia Esquivias: Still from *Folklore I*, 2006; DVD, 14:43 min.; still from *Folklore II*, 2008; DVD, 13:33 min.; courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York.

Olivia Plender: *The Medium and Daybreak*, 2007; installation view, Auckland Art Gallery, 2007; dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist.

Tris Vonna-Michell: *Finding Chopin*, 2008; performance still, *Reykjavik Experiment Marathon*, Reykjavik Art Museum, 2008; courtesy of the artist and Cabinet, London. Photo: Karl Petersson.

Tris Vonna-Michell: *Seizure*, 2004–2008; installation view, Kunsthalle Zürich, 2008; dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist and Cabinet, London. Photo: Stefan Altenburger.



BAM Galleries 2626 Bancroft Way, Berkeley
Gallery Information (510) 642-0808 bampfa.berkeley.edu

BENDING THE WORD

matrix 226

MARTHA COLBURN

PATRICIA ESQUIVIAS

OLIVIA PLENDER

TRIS VONNA-MICHELL

UC BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE
SEPTEMBER 28, 2008 – FEBRUARY 8, 2009