

## Conversation

### Javier Téllez and Montserrat Albores

**Montserrat Albores** Good morning, I'm Montserrat Albores and I think many of you already know Javier Téllez. He's done considerable work in Mexico, and has had shows at the Carrillo Gil and Rufino Tamayo museums as well as the La Panadería Gallery, among other places. Since the beginning of his career he has studied constructions of madness. Both Javier and I would like to review the piece he just did for the Aspen Art Museum with you. We'll ask him to talk a little about the context of its production, the piece's conceptualization, his methodology and relationships with both the Oasis Clubhouse psychiatric institution, outpatients and the museum. But beforehand we'd like to review the piece with you and then begin the discussion.

**Javier Téllez** First of all, Montse, I'd like to thank you, and thank Ivo Mesquita as well, and SITAC for its invitation to be more impertinent—or maybe I should say imprudent—today than we normally are. So to begin with one or two follies, I'd like to announce here that this is perhaps the last time that I accept an invitation to speak as the sole author of a work that frequently involves collaboration with others; the most appropriate thing would be to invite my collaborators as well, as for more than a decade I've worked with patients from psychiatric hospitals in different parts of the world, producing videos and installations that seek to articulate a collective voice regarding mental illness and psychiatric institutions. For example, I wish Aaron Sheley, the writer and principal actor of the film you're going to see, were here, since he could offer a different perspective about the production processes and intentions of this film shot in May of this year in a ghost town in Aspen, Colorado. Our film is entitled *Oedipus Marshal* and is based on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The script and its interpretation were executed by people who suffer from mental illness, outpatients who come daily to the Oasis Clubhouse in Grand Junction, a facility that's part of the state of Colorado's mental health system. *Oedipus Marshal* lasts 30 minutes and was filmed in super 16 mm. Unfortunately, the conditions for its projection are not ideal.

[*Oedipus Marshal* is presented.]

**JT** I want to apologize to the audience for the predominance of white in the film; the image is overexposed. This is a problem inherent to the technology, that we have to accept.

**MA** These things will happen. I would like to begin with what you said at the start of the dialogue, when you spoke of the problem of collaboration. I'd like to talk about collaboration more in terms of the object that's produced, rather than in terms of its

authorship, which I think has already been resolved. I see that you begin by moving us from Thebes to Aspen. The film presents the landscape of the traditional Western, but a subtitle at its beginning indicates *Thebes 1856*. There's a break between the text and the landscape and this allows for both *Oedipus Rex* the tragedy's original setting as well as the American West as the ideal setting for a Western. I have the impression that through these strategies you're making an object that involves multiple texts and multiple narratives; where the archetypal text and its re-interpretation—or perhaps better said, its re-writing—run parallel. But this also expands to a re-writing of the Western as well as the Freudian myth. I'd like you to talk about how the script was written, what your relationship with the patients was as you filmed, about how Sophocles' *Oedipus*, the reading Freud makes of that text, and the script you did with Aaron Sheley parallel one another, and how a space with multiple discourses came to exist.

**JT** Each time I approach a community I don't know, I carry a gift—Marcel Mauss's concept of the gift interests me greatly. In this case, the gift was myth, since we arrived at the Oasis Clubhouse in Colorado with the idea of making a film, a Western, that would also attempt a re-reading of the Oedipus myth and feature psychiatric patients. This was the starting point of our collaboration. In a certain way that idea functioned as the connector with my collaborators, so together we could create a network of relationships between the Western, Greek tragedy and their own experiences. We approached the Western as the epic American genre *par excellence*, a genre fundamental to understanding that nation in the collective imagination. The Oedipus myth was then *translated* to the local geopolitical context. We began the process of building the piece by organizing workshops with the members of the Oasis Clubhouse, where essentially we critically studied diverse classics of the genre: the films of John Ford, Howard Hawks, Anthony Mann, Budd Boettincher, Sam Peckinpah, etc. Together we also read Sophocles' tragedies and then we used another connector between Greek tragedy and the American West: Japanese Noh theatre. That's where the use of the Noh masks and the peculiar temporality of our film come from.

**MA** I don't know if you'd like to talk a little about the use of masks in the film.

**JT** I think the mask was very important for the patients who were actors in the film. They wanted masks that would help them create characters, and enter into the personae they were asked to interpret. As we know, the etymology of the word *persona* is *mask*. As well, the use of masks is obviously a fundamental component in Greek tragedy, so the masks reaffirm the ritual content in the myth's narration.

**MA** Returning to myth, it interests me that in the reading that you and Aaron did, Oedipus is subject to hearing voices. I would presume that you're commenting on the construction of discourses.

**JT** One of Aaron's biggest contributions to Oedipus' story was that in our film, Oedipus internally incorporates the voices of the Greek chorus. Therefore the character is

situated outside the framework of neuroses, contrary to the Freudian reading of the myth. Our Oedipus suffers from schizophrenia. You could say that our film's fundamental themes are fate and schizophrenia. Or more precisely, schizophrenia as fate.

**MA** The big difference between hearing voices and hearing a Greek chorus would reside there.

**JT** Clearly, because in some way the Greek chorus is a mediator between the actor and the audience. The chorus speaks both to the actors and to the audience at the same time. Our chorus of hallucinatory voices functions in the same way, but it's speaking at the same time both within and outside Oedipus' head. We worked on this exchange between what is real and what is imaginary in particular during the editing of the soundtrack: out of this came the ghostly and disembodied presence of voices, interpreted by children, that play the role of omniscient narrators in each of the tragedy's phases, at the same time they guide Oedipus each time he encounters a conflict.

**MA** Could you tell us a little bit more about the relationship between the Western and tragedy?

**JT** The connection is Noh drama, the most ancient classical theatre tradition in the world that has survived without significant change or alteration. So we use Noh as a connection to approach Greek tragedy, about which little is known: only a few pieces from Greek theatre are extant, we don't have a precise idea of how the performances were carried out, what masks were used, what instruments were played, etc. That's why we chose Noh as an equivalent. As well, the choice allows us to explore the topography of the ghost town, since Noh drama is a theatre of ghosts, and we can superficially describe Noh as a drama in two acts: in the first a disguised ghost appears; in the second the ghost reveals its immaterial condition. Noh was the perfect vehicle for speaking of two ghosts: the Oedipus myth and the myth of the American West.

**MA** Is this related as well to the notion of the historical in Greek tragedy?

**JT** Indeed: Noh drama allowed us to speak with Sophocles, and to speak with Sophocles is to speak with a ghost. In this sense the themes of memory and oblivion, and the impossibility of relating to an origin from which today we are irremediably separated—Greek civilization and myth—are fundamental.

**MA** How did you conceive of the notion of fate in relation to your reading?

**JT** Fate is myth's fundamental theme: we wonder if Oedipus is a puppet of fate or if he has the free will to change it. This can be seen in the auditory hallucinations and Oedipus' reaction to them. Aaron Sheley would be able to express this very well if he were here tonight, because he has experienced sound hallucinations, and during filming he told me something very touching that I'd like to share with you: "sometimes voices are bad and do harm, but sometimes they're good, so you always have to listen to them to know the difference"... Isn't that true?

**MA** Therefore, relating fate to madness, the notion of Oedipus' banishment seems to be related to the marginalization of mental patients.

**JT** The film is circular, a little bit like what the English translation of Sophocles' text says: *over and over again*. So our film begins with Oedipus' being expelled as a child, and ends with his expulsion after his incestuous act—the taboo—is discovered. Oedipus becomes a representation, in allegory, of the mentally ill and their marginal situation in society.

**MA** Returning a little to the problem of collaboration, there's a part of the artwork that interests me quite a bit: unlike a lot of creative practices that have to do with communities, or that have more to do with the temporal than the sculptural, that is, practices that situate their specificity in the problem of community or the ephemeral nature of the socialization process, it's interesting that your relationship to the patient is never documented. That is, a process is generated that encompasses all discourses. But your daily, colloquial-level work with Aaron, writing the script, or your process of contacting the institution, doesn't take on conceptualism's tradition of creating the register, or shooting photographs or video, nor is it radicalized as in Elin Wikström's work, where the action that takes place can only be experienced in the *interaction field* by those who are participating; where there is no register at all for what happens. For her, the notion of the audience disappears to allow for the notion of participant. So it's interesting that, besides not using either of those two formats, you use a strategy that starts out with socialization but coalesces in a more sculptural fashion and makes use of its placement in the museum.

**JT** Well, in principle I'm dubious of so-called *process art* works, that seem tautological to me in most cases, and sometimes puritanical. More pertinent, I think, is the debate that emerged from 60's cinema, questioning the divisions between fiction and documentary; I think a large part of those works considered *documentaries*, that document some process, are obviously a fiction as well, one that seeks to hide its narrative construction. I'm more interested in presenting the work as a free-standing text, and more interested that the final text's elaboration has been effected in collaboration with the Other, and that the final text is the fruit of this collaboration. That's why I have no interest in "the making of;" I'm fundamentally interested in the film we are able to make. I'm not interested in the documentation of this process. With *One Flew Over the Void*, this was precisely the case: the artwork resided in the event, not in the process of getting to the event. I believe this is *part* of the work and *part* of the aesthetic experience; we can affirm that living for seven days in an Aspen ghost town is an experience that transcends the everyday, but it's also a fact that it does not constitute the artwork *per se*.

**MA** Related to that, I also think the current confusion or contemporary idea of the artist as a social worker generates demands for therapy or cures in your work.

**JT** I distance myself radically from artistic practices where the artist-magician takes on the role of a shaman, as is the case, for example, in the work of Lygia Clark, who worked with the mentally ill. I'm not interested in cures as the artwork's intent; the point of my work is not to cure psychiatric patients. A cure could *perhaps* be offered to those who go to the museum to see the artwork; the ones who think of themselves

as *normal*. The important thing is to question the border that's been created between normality and pathology. If there's something we need to cure, undoubtedly it's society, not patients.

**MA** In relation to techniques that base themselves in communities, and have made place into a more social than spatial locus, it would interest me if you'd speak about your relationship with psychiatric institutions. That community is quite extensive, massively so. Your work takes you to, and takes place in, very specific places: at Bedlam, in England; and at Oasis Clubhouse in Grand Junction...

**JT** Well, there are unique characteristics and differences from place to place, but it's also interesting to note that the "science" of psychiatric hospitals claims to be universal, so in general we could say that if you've seen one psychiatric hospital, you've seen them all.

But the familial context that psychiatric institutions offer has been for me the best antidote for surviving all the biennials, since every time I'm invited to one of these events, I extend the invitation to the local psychiatric hospital as well, where I put together specific pieces that can possess a certain verticality that couldn't be achieved in another context.

**MA** So you would posit that your technique is a site-specific practice?

**JT** Yes, when we work in specific places with specific communities.

**MA** But then, it's repeatable; I could put it up again in another museum.

**JT** True...

**MA** The work's production process is what would give it its specificity.

**JT** Yes, it's a specific production, in spite of its installation and distribution in other contexts. That is, the work functions first in the context of hospital life and then in its distribution outside the walls of the psychiatric institution. Here perhaps, we could speak of a double, non-exclusive specificity.

Somehow I think the moment has arrived to return to a definition of autonomy in artistic practice.

**MA** I want you to tell me more about the problem of autonomy because I know that it interests you greatly.

**JT** A little while ago I received an invitation to a biennial in the Canary Islands. The letter came with a sort of pre-made press kit; that is, it said I was Venezuelan, it talked to me about the Venezuelan communities in the Canary Islands... The artwork was practically planned out before I'd even opened the letter... We inevitably suffer from labeling at these events.

**MA** But can you tell me more about your notion of autonomy? It really interests me.

**JT** It's interesting to conceive of work that has a concrete relationship to the community, but I believe the framework of relations that's produced on the international circuit pre-determines these interrelations as fictitious... Maybe this is what so-called *relational aesthetics* is trying to achieve, but we'd need more time to deconstruct that mechanism.

**MA** Well, yes, that's a complex question... Anyway, I think the film is very interesting, and I'm sure that many of you must have a number of questions for Javier, so let's open it up to questions.

**Pedro Reyes** Javier, when it comes to setting up a scene: Have you ever considered what Jacob Levi Moreno did with regard to psychodrama?

**JT** Obviously Moreno's work has interested me greatly, but I reaffirm that my work does not have a therapeutic intent. In his psychodrama, you must constantly question the premise of the *master* in relation to actor/patient's subordinate position. The critical distance I maintain from Moreno's work comes out of that.

**Pedro Reyes** And is there any relation to Augusto Boal and the "theatre of the oppressed?"

**JT** I was just thinking that Boal's proposal is more interesting than Moreno's, in the sense that it introduces the possibility that the actor could also become an author.

**Pedro Reyes** When you said that what needs to be cured is society, one of Moreno's hypotheses—which he never managed to develop—is that of *sociatrics*, the science or art of curing society. I don't know, there were also a couple of ideas that were a little nonsensical...

**JT** Well, there are a lot of nonsensical things that are interesting... For example, experiments in anti-psychiatry. I don't consider myself an anti-psychiatrist; but from that generation of psychiatrists, the most redeemable for me is Franco Basaglia. He made a concrete social change in Italian psychiatry—which turned out to be much more of a "heterotopia" than a utopia: the dissolution of the psychiatric hospital—or more precisely, the insane asylum—and in its place, the inclusion of psychiatric clinics within general hospitals. I'm also interested in the work of so-called *institutional psychiatry*: François Tosquelles, Jean Oury and Félix Guattari, the last great theorists of twentieth-century psychiatry. In the case of the La Borde clinic in Paris, the patients answer the phone at the same time the psychiatrists cook and clean the bathrooms; everyone at the hospital is in therapy. This role-exchange destroys the unequal relationship of authority and paternalism between the therapist and the patient. This interest in symbolically questioning power relationships has to do with my own life experience, since as a child I often visited the hospital where my father worked as a psychiatrist, and I especially recall the Carnival celebrations that they organized there: the psychiatrists disguised themselves as patients and the patients went as psychiatrists. So there you have the best example of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories. For me, those carnival celebrations represent a paradigmatic model of how my work is constructed.

**Allan McCollum** Javier, does it make sense to ask about the circumstances of production for this work in particular? Because I'm not sure if all the information presented about different types of works was translated, in particular with regard to art events and their circumstances. Could you speak of the circumstances of this production in particular? Was it unique in relation to other exhibitions? Maybe you could expand on that...

**JT** The experience with *Oedipus Marshal* was unique in the sense that the production circumstances were ideal: a team of sixteen not including the actors, plus wardrobe, animals and a fabulous set. It was a commission from the Aspen Museum to make a new, one-artist project, which gave it a different focus from other international events I've participated in, where there was less time for production, so we were always working in "emergency mode." In Aspen we had sufficient time and funding to rehearse and produce a narrative film. We also did a very similar piece, in terms of time and production as part of the biennial that Isabel Carlos curated in Sydney. Everything depends on the curators and how much they want to invest—and I'm not just talking about money—in certain production practices.

**Participant** With regard to autonomy, this might be a vulgar question, but, comparing the inSite project with this new object, work, or whatever you want to call it, can we talk about autonomy, in different forms and in relation to both, when one is a more ephemeral and transitory work and the other is a film? Or maybe the inSite project does address issues of the artist's or the artwork's autonomy...

**JT** When I was speaking of autonomy, I was referring to the artist's autonomy within systems of production. It's interesting that you bring up these two examples. The inSite\_05 work in a certain sense became a staged show and in some ways this was part of the work itself. The fact that people in London or Baghdad could be watching a TV screen and see a human cannonball crossing the U.S./Mexico border is as much a part of the piece as the installation where the event is documented. By that token, we're really dealing with multiple spaces that transcend the art world space. In the case of the films, the final intention could be to expand them to a 35mm format and run them in another medium, i.e., the cinema.

**MA** In relation to inSite, I'd like for you to tell us how you understand the notion of *event*. You invite the patients, they come, but, is this one of the artwork's production factors or is it part of the artwork? Is the artwork only shown in the museum, or is its celebration part of it, too?

**JT** Well, I understand the piece in various modes. I want to transcend two borders: the geopolitical one between Mexico and the United States as well as the wall of the psychiatric hospital. The patients from Mexicali were moved to Tijuana to create an event that I think worked well as an artwork in itself, but as well, a video installation was produced which is also a work of art in its own right.

**MA** It's interesting, now that you mention it, that going outside the psychiatric institution's architectural perimeter creates a mix between those who are supposedly sane and those who supposedly aren't, and that as well, in this specific case the people who did it were in disguise...

**JT** Indeed. If Heidegger said that the border is not where something ends but rather, the space where something begins to make its presence manifest, then for me the walls of the psychiatric hospital not only define who's inside them, but also those of us who are outside.

**MA** Yes. And then yesterday we were talking about how the unsaid starts to appear...

**JT** Obviously, what is *not said*, the unutterable, is included in what *is* said; the axis of the language we speak clearly includes the language of madness, madness as a language, schizophrenia as a language that is excluded from the *lingua franca* that lets you and I communicate with one another.

**Participant** Hello, thank you; this is Gerardo speaking. I liked your film a lot, and it provoked a lot of thought regarding its *humanistic* aspects. I heard you say your father was a psychiatrist and that your life was almost like living in a carnival celebration. With your psychological perspective of the world, how do you make your art? Is art a way of curing your schizophrenia? How do you relate your individuality with collectivity?

**JT** Art doesn't cure anything, but it does allow you to enjoy the symptoms.

**Participant** In your process, I understand you're not interested in therapeutic elements or in curing people, but I also understand that you're also not interested in provoking a crisis in them, or something worse, or better. Is there someone on site who can control a situation like that and put limits on the production? I think there are certain symptoms that can be provoked by what we see. Do you recognize that possibility?

**JT** Naturally, I'm very interested in psychiatry, but I am not a psychiatrist. I have nothing against those people, I respect them a great deal, and their work is a tremendous influence on mine. I believe psychiatric hospitals are a necessary evil; I'm not opposed to them; but I do believe they must change. While I believe mental illnesses exist, I also believe they are constructions. Whatever happened to hysteria, for example, and hysterics? Hysterical women disappeared because the discourse that constructed them disappeared; the discourse of mental illness changes every day. As a *human being* I'm interested in curing sickness, where possible, but I'm not a psychiatrist, I'm an artist. The meaning and purpose of my work is something else entirely.

**Participant** Related to what Joshua said when he questioned art's social relevance, how would you link these discourses to the artist's autonomy?

**JT** The artist's autonomy can be, for instance, transgressing the canon. The art world is motivated—Ivo talked about this—by visions alternative to those in art history. One example is T.S. Eliot, who published his poem *The Wasteland* with footnotes; another is Duchamp and his instruction manual for reading *Large Glass*; or Raymond Roussel and his revelation of method. The artist must create his own context as part of the artwork. In my case, I like to transgress the canon by introducing this other language, the language of madness. By contaminating art with language that has been excluded, language that is currently imprisoned in psychiatric hospitals.

**Participant** Hello, good morning. How important is the moment in the film when the mask is discovered? Why did you decide to do it that way?

**JT** It's a way to bring an element of Greek tragedy, catharsis, into play. I believe the film produces discomfort in the viewer because the mask a kind of blot between the actor

and the screen and between the screen and the viewer. It's essential to reveal the faces at the end as a sort of catharsis, since there was also a need on the part of the actors to reveal their own faces in a context beyond the stigmatization that occurs when we confront mental illness. It's about an exchange of *personae*, showing the mask behind the mask, and seeing mental illness as a representation, not as an anomaly.

**Participant** I have a question related to the question of process and the art product or object's autonomy. I note something of a contradiction in the discourse because on one hand you begin the discussion emphasizing the process and the importance of including all the participants. But on the other hand, in the final product this process is negated; we stand before an invisible process, and we see the product in the context of contemporary art, where the artist—or genius—contradicts the process. I'd like to hear something about this contradiction, and I'd also like to ask Montserrat about a clarification she made regarding authorship as something that's been resolved in contemporary art. Could you expand on that?

**MA** I'm sorry, that was a problem of language; let me recontextualize that. What I really meant to say was that I'm interested in thinking about collaboration in terms of the object it generates: everything from the space where multiple texts begin to operate, to where the possibility exists that, starting with the fiction or the text, in juxtaposition with others, realities begin to be generated. I'm not interested in making a declaration regarding the insignificance of the problem of authorship, but I do think within contemporary art this problem has been amply discussed: the "death" of the author, the appropriation of preexisting objects, etc. That's why I said I wasn't interested in discussing collaboration in terms of authorship.

**JT** As regards the process... I already said that presenting the construction of the process or the documentation of the process as a work of art is not of interest to me, in that those types of narratives, which claim to be objective, are problematic. Polyphonic narratives that can be constructed in collaboration with the Other interest me in particular. But I believe that every documentary is fiction and that every fiction is in some way documentary. Jean-Luc Goddard said that cinema was 24 lies per second, since every second of film contains 24 photographs, and the illusion of movement is a fictitious representation of the real. But we must also note that these photos are real in their unquestionable condition as objects and signifiers, even if reality doesn't really move at 24 frames per second.

Returning to our film, what I'd like to say is that for us the important thing was Greek tragedy and recreating the Oedipus myth in the American West to speak metaphorically about mental illness. The artwork was not an anecdote about filming or the process of writing the script or putting together the costumes; it was the narrative contained in the film.

**José Luis Barrios** I'd like for you to expand on that: I see the use of madness as problematic. Madness constructs its own narrative, so what does it mean if you

channel this narrative into a performance? That would be my first question. Because if we look at the schizophrenic phenomenon of hearing voices, this is not the sole prerogative of madness; it could occur in sane or insane people; it is a mere fictional device. How do you inscribe that relationship is the first question. Which takes me to another relationship that's very important: I'm reminded of Lars Von Trier's *The Idiots*, which uses a perhaps more corporal register as a large part of its critique of certain mental illnesses. Ultimately, you're using techniques of fiction. What do you gain from the community of madness, as the site for the subversion of something, if at the same time you affirm the existence of an object? For me, this object—or madness—is a mere device and is not, at least that I saw, generating a united, collective space where such madness [sic] can be generated.

**JT** I've always said that it's a process of collaboration, it's the difference between a collective and a collaborative work. This is not the Téllez collective; it is the work of Javier Téllez in collaboration with a hospital's patients. It has something to do with the Other, and here we need to refer to Emmanuel Lévinas: the only way to understand yourself is to understand yourself in relation to the Other. For autobiographical reasons, I've chosen that that Other be a psychiatric patient and as well, because in some sense I still believe in Paul Klee's beautiful statement that *the important thing is to make visible*. I try to make those who have been marginalized and stripped of visibility visible to the public discourse. When was the last time you saw a mentally ill person on TV? The mentally ill are unable to intervene in the discourse of their representation, which is principally determined by the psychiatric hospital. So one of the intents of my work is to provide tools to the psychiatric patient so that he or she can become the agent of his or her own representation. For that reason, madness is not a pretext. I think that cinematographically you can film the idea of hearing voices beautifully, as Hitchcock did brilliantly in the case of Norman Bates, without collaborating with the mentally ill; but you would also need to observe to what degree this exogenous representation of mental illness runs the risk of stigmatizing the mental patient, as I believe is the case with *Psycho*.

For instance, without Aaron Sheley's direct experience in the area of sound hallucination, the narrative of this film would have been completely different. For me the most important thing is collaboration with people who have a specific knowledge of mental illness based on lived experience, since this means incorporating language excluded from the aesthetic arena.

**Participant** It seems very symbolic to me that you're producing an art object that could be seen as cinema as well, and that you're speaking of the artwork and the artist's autonomy. I wonder specifically that if you decide to put a particular kind of artwork in other circuits, or other distribution systems, before other audiences, amid different signifiers or in different language, what will happen or what would you expect, in not just letting go of, but in fact disassociating yourself entirely from the artwork?

**JT** It's a little bit like an echo, or a pebble that falls into the river and the ripples it creates. Fable and myth interest me greatly, as they involve the collective. It's incredible how certain pieces have this mythical baggage and turn into fables or legends, and how people's readings of the piece will vary. In the case of the human cannonball, very few people saw the event itself nor even the documentation of the event. But it exists locally as an oral history, as a fable. I think that's one more "life" for the piece, the way it's read and how others can use it. In short, it's an open text.

**Participant** When you began your collaboration with the patients, did you present your previous work to them? Did you let them see videos of your other works? Did you discuss your ideas with them in a normal fashion?

**JT** Yes, that was the first step. I introduced myself and showed them my work. Seeing my previous work represented to them the importance of discovering my professional strategies, and at the same time they were interested in knowing the context of other psychiatric institutions and the experiences of other patients. It was a very interesting process, one of debate. They're very critical as well, make no mistake.

**MA** I think time is running out and we're going to have to wrap up, unless there are any other very brief questions.

**Participant** I'd like for you to tell me a little bit about your passion for the cinema, because I think I know your work with mental patients and I believe that I would have doubts about whether they're crazy or not. I think the film transcends that level. I couldn't get Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex* out of my head, I don't know why. I understand why, but at the same time I don't, since visually they're entirely different, and I love that. I don't have a problem with whether or not it's an object, in the museum or outside the museum; I think it's something self-sustaining, and my references when I was looking at it were more cinematographic than anything else. That's why I'd like for you to speak about your passion for making films.

**JT** My passion for film... it always goes back to childhood. My grandfather had a movie theatre so that was the great passion of my childhood. I started out studying cinema and I've always tried to switch over to the other camp, image in movement, and *camera obscura*, which is much more interesting. In this piece in particular, as in *The Passion of Jeanne d'Arc*, we posited cinema as an endangered species, or better yet, posited a cinema about cinema as an endangered species. Out of that came making a film today about a Greek tragedy, that is, a film about ghosts—so we had to use a ghost medium. That's why it was important to shoot on film and not on video.

**Participant** Last question: I understand why masks were used and I thought it was marvelous, but you told us this was a Western, that it took place in the American West, that it spoke of Greek tragedy and used Kabuki...

**Participant** ...and I'd like to know how you chose the music if you brought in all these far-Eastern elements.



**JT** Noh. It was Noh drama, not Kabuki. The music of course comes from Noh drama. First we considered the film's setting: we went to the ghost town in Colorado and decided to do a ghost story with dramatic devices taken from Noh and the Western. Oedipus is outside of time, he's atemporal, because Oedipus came from the Greeks but he's still with us and I hope he will stay with us. We can also see him as an archetype. In the film it's hard to know at what point the action is taking place, because you could say that the characters are rehearsing their tragedy for all eternity... That's why the Noh masks were the most effective tool. The mask is basically a connector between Greek tragedy and the Western, that allowed us to photograph ghosts.

**MA** Well, I'd just like to thank Javier and Ivo Mesquita for giving us the opportunity to talk here. And of course the people at SITAC.

**JT** Thank you.

Translated by Michael Parker Stainback.

## Conversation

### Allan McCollum and Lilian Tone

**Lilian Tone** One thing that I would like to point out is that I think Ivo invited us here to show how Allan's work transits into and out of these two models: studio practice and the more collaborative model. And I'm going to ask Allan to very briefly tell us the story of his work, which stretches over thirty-five years, concentrating on the lesser-known projects and on recent projects that he has developed in the last ten years. And I think that it's going to become clear that the history of his work has covered quite varied terrain while remaining the same exact project. I was very fortunate to hear Allan give an overview of his work and it was a wonderful thing to see how in the same project, there are continued attempts to look for a bigger picture of the world. [...]

**Allan McCollum** Thank you, Lilian. As Lilian said, I have thirty-five years to discuss. I don't know how I'll describe thirty-five years in twenty or thirty minutes, so I'll try to only say one or two sentences per project, and I apologize if I don't give you enough information but this is the nature of the situation. I'm going to start in the 1960s. During that period I considered myself a painter, in the sense that I wanted to be an artist, and what is an artist? A painter. That was the stereotype in my head. But I wanted to include the ideas of making, production and mass production. So I produced paintings using mass-production techniques in my studio, mainly gluing two-inch-wide strips of canvas together with boat caulking, and eventually created a painting that was little more than the demonstration of how that painting was made. That was in 1969-1970.

In 1975 I invented—I like to say “invented” because it sounds so silly—a “kit” for producing an artwork. These little grid paintings were made using mass-production techniques from offset lithography. I printed sixteen little shapes over and over, tore them out, and glued them together like tile-work or knitting or weaving. You could come up with any possible number of small paintings or large paintings, depending on what you wanted. And this kit would produce paintings, colors, watercolors, whatever you wanted to put on the paper.

One of the reasons for this was that I was trying to be a little humorous about the formal description of a painting as being something flat, hanging on a wall. The American painters said “The first four lines of your composition are the edges of the canvas.” I decided to make art using only edges—that was part of the humor.

I was very young, but I did get tired of hearing people talking about art in terms of the history of art and the history of painting. What I wasn't hearing often enough in those days, I thought, was people talking about the art object as an object that existed not only in relation to the paintings that came before it but in relation to the couch that was underneath it and the lamp that was next to it, and the people walking around