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ulianne Swartz

tend the thread:

in conversation with Jonathan VanDyke

In 2000 an act of arson destroyed new construction at a synagogue in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Jonathan VanDyke, then curator of Harrisburg's Susquehanna Art Museum, asked three contemporary artists of Jewish heritage to respond to this event through community-based public projects. The artists Julianne Swartz, Gedi Sibony, and Shira Weinert, all New Yorkers, worked in Harrisburg to create collaborative works with a diverse audience. Julianne Swartz contributed the project *Link/Line*, for which she ran a continuous red thread for five miles, from the museum to Harrisburg's Jewish Community Center, passing through homes, businesses, schools, and places of worship along the way. VanDyke and Swartz (who for several years were loft-mates in New York City) sat down to discuss *Link/Line*, and Swartz's recent installation, *Somewhere Harmony*, which she created for the Whitney Biennial 2004, and how a work of art might serve as a type of topography.

Jonathan VanDyke: One of the extraordinary things for me about the *Link/Line* project was how you created a community of hosts who would assist you, by tending the thread in their home or workplace. You even gave hosts thread bracelets with the *Link/Line* logo and the phrase "Keep the Link-Tend the Thread." How did you find participants?

Julianne Swartz: You and the museum staff were helpful in making contacts and finding hosts. Some people I had met, many I hadn't. We picked up a few spontaneous hosts along the way. We were running the thread past an army base, which was on the route, and two Privates came out and asked what we were doing. They were very eager to participate, so we signed them on and ran the thread through their office.

JVD: It was quite a production. You carried a long stick with a spool, and a group of assistants and a local reporter trailed you. Harrisburg is a busy city, and I remember people walking by and just staring at you, and people in their cars stopping to ask questions. So how did you make your hosts comfortable? How did you convince them?

JS: (laughing) Well, I can be very convincing! I think that people could read that I was well-meaning, and I also think people were amused by this really outrageous idea. Ninety percent of the people that I told about the project



laughed first, then said, “Are you serious? You want to run a continuous line of thread through the city?” I think people were seduced by the craziness of it. It was an unusual thing they were asked to take part in, and some people appreciated that opportunity. I also think that people want to connect to other people, and they were drawn to the project’s intention.

JVD: I remember you working with a group of school children who were hosts, and you said, “When you hold the red thread in your hands, you are connected to every other person in the community that holds the red thread.” Asking people to take care of a thread was a really poetic way to express how ephemeral our connections are.

JS: That was intentional, given the fragility of the material, the fact that you

don’t even notice it. The insignificance, the instability of the material is a representation. You have a thought. What can be a material representation of that thought? A thin piece of thread seemed to me to be just this side of the materiality of a thought. But also it was material that you could follow, a physical device, a trail.

JVD: When we say the word community we have an amorphous feeling – at least I do – about a size and a shape of a group of people. As we investigate that term and what it means, we realize how fragile that term is. Any given community is really dependent on how we are willing to define ourselves, and our relationships to each other, at any given point. I think that your projects get at this. *Link/Line* is an artwork that we can’t hold or see anymore. Does it continue to exist, as a relationship? Does the project still exist to the extent that we’re talking about it right now? Your public works and installations always ask whether the material of the work of art is important at all. The experience of your work is primary.

JS: Some of my favorite pieces of art I've never seen. They've just been described to me. Certain concepts are powerful enough to override material, or override materiality, and materials become just a vehicle for that concept. I think about that Yoko Ono piece, with the ladder – you climb up the ladder, and you find a magnifying glass, and you use it to look at a little word on the ceiling, which says, "Yes." I love that piece. I've never seen it. I don't feel like I need to see it, because I already feel like I have my own experience of that piece, just to think about it, just to consider it.

JVD: The flip side of is that even for the immateriality of *Link/Line*, we had to go to great lengths to consider the material consequences of a simple thread. Would the thread trip someone? Would an animal eat it? Because the thread passed through government space, we had to get permission from the city officials. There was this absurdity, where the city had these tractors that clean the sidewalks, and we had to figure out how the tractors would effect the thread, and vice versa. It was absurd and wonderful at the same time, all the connotations of running a thread that seemed to disappear from the moment you laid it down.

One of the things that I've admired about your work is that once you get an idea that you will create a certain type of experience, everything else becomes captive to the creation of that experience, and you will just push materials and situations until it happens.

JS: Thanks. That's a little scary. I've never really wanted a project to work and not had it work, I've always conveyed what I want to convey, but there's a toll, a sacrifice.

JVD: What's the sacrifice?

JS: As you said, everything feeds the work. Having lived with me, you know what the sacrifice is, you know it very well (laughing)... The sacrifice is a certain amount of serenity, and... I guess we're getting off the track.

JVD: I guess I'm getting at a certain fearlessness in terms of your willingness



to connect people through your work. Do you intend the viewer to take risks?

JS: I would hope I do. That's certainly my intention. With *Link/Line*, not only was it interactive, it was collaborative with all the people involved. Even my gallery work and sculptural work is interactive, it asks the viewer to participate in a physical way: *Look inside this thing, listen here, stand here, follow this...*

JVD: Let's get to this idea of topography. A topography is a form of description, and it is a symbol for a bigger reality. How is a topography expressed through an artwork?

JS: I think an artwork can be a map that you read with your fingers, almost like braille that would give you a sense of this territory that the artist wants you to explore.

JVD: But I think that you are ultimately creating something that you want people to touch with their minds, rather than with their bodies. Is that accurate?

JS: Yes, that's an interesting way of thinking about it, and it's not inaccurate... I would say, touch space with your mind, and experience time with your body.

For the most part, in all of my major pieces and installations, you have to go from one space to another to experience them, you have to sort of condense two entirely separate moments and experiences into one one. You could never represent any of my installations in one photograph. That's why I think of them as narratives without sequence. I think what I make is closer to film than to traditional sculpture.

JVD: Your Whitney piece [a series of clear plastic tubes that carried the sound of people singing and humming "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" over four flights of stairs] had to be experienced as a sequence. The tubes had these emanation points, where you would put your ear up against an aperture in a pipe, and hear the sounds of diverse voices.





Although it happened in a stairwell, which was very public, the specific experiences of listening – did you mean for them to be so solitary?

JS: Oh yes, absolutely. Those private moments were very intentional, because the idea was to make a simultaneous experience of the individual and the collective, and to recognize one's place in that. The idea with those listening points was that you would be having this very private moment, just you and that human voice that is singing or whispering in your ear. You would have an intimate experience with another human being, in the midst of the Whitney Biennial, the stairwell crazy with all those people. That's something I use in my work a lot, the private moment in a very public place. It's a device – which I think art uses a lot – that really allows you to go in your mind, to another world, for a moment.

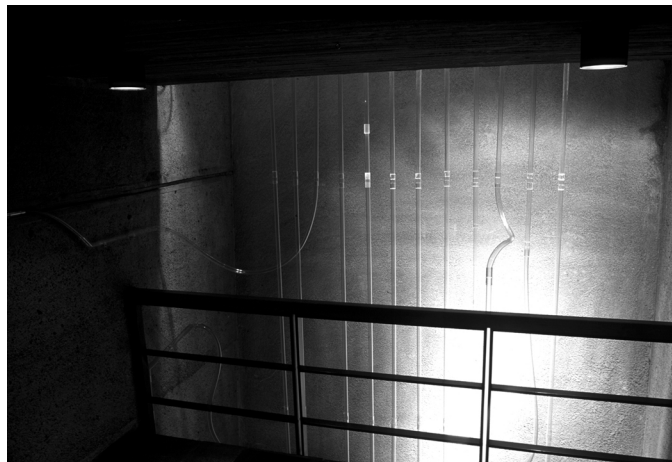
JVD: Your work is always pushing for a sort of rift to take place, a transgression, an alternate experience.

JS: I like to think that in the reality we live in, there are all these simultaneous experiences available. It is a goal of my work to find a quarter turn on reality, an experience within an experience that gives a different perspective.

JVD: Is it important to you that that experience be emotional?

JS: Recently, yes. I felt like the phenomenological experience wasn't enough, that it needed an emotional dimension, too. Not my work right now, but the work right before it – it was all about accessing an experience of disorientation, accessing an emotional new place, or even an emotional old place.

JVD: And when you push that emotional barrier in your own relationship to your work – I know you talked about it taking its toll – is there a point at which you need to make that





process stop? Is there a too much?

JS: No, I don't think so. I think it's just what you have energy for, and what your job is to do at that time in your life. You have different stages where you have different needs, in terms of what to put

into your work, and what to get out of your work.

JVD: Is there a point at which you are feeding your work, more than your work is feeding you?

JS: I think that's inevitable. That's what we sign on for. I think inevitably you never get out of your work what you put into it. That's why it's timeless. There's always a reservoir there for people to access. You make that pledge when you want to be an artist. You don't do it because it's practical. You do it because you need to give, and you need to put something out of yourself and out into the world.

JVD: As a curator I worked with the notion that museums have increasingly become community centers, in which we are called upon as artists and as creative people to get people to interact, sometimes in ways that can be uncomfortable. I think this is why contemporary art has had some difficult consequences when it goes out into the world. Because we are asking people to address pretty deep-seated fears, discomforts, pains. I hope art will be difficult. Because ultimately it provides an opportunity to transcend such fears. I felt so strongly about the *Link/Line* project because I think it provided clear points for communication in the aftermath of a difficult event.

I think what I've been pushing you on a little bit is to try and get at what really drives you in your work, what keeps pushing you to create these experiences, which are not easy?

JS: I think what drives me is the desire to connect to other people. My work, in some ways, comes from a very lonely place in me, that wants to reach other people.

JVD: I guess a map can feel very lonely... until you experience what is represented by that map.

JS: A map is only a graphic representation, there's no human representation.



JVD: And in a way your works are maps that are sort of human representations?

JS: Yeah...yes. OK.

JVD: Can I ask one more question? I remember this time - I think I told you this before - when I overheard someone asking you whether you were interested in outer space in your work, and you said, "No, I'm interested in inner space."

JS: (laughs)

JVD: So... Is that something you try to bring to your work?

JS: Yes, to create space inside people's perceptions, inside people's hearts, inside people's ideas. If you insert space into something that is a fixed idea, or a fixed perception, it opens it up to light and air.

images 1 - 4

Link/Line (2001)

Site- specific public project Harrisburg, PA

Commission, The Susquehanna Art Museum

60,000 feet of red thread, 93 community volunteers

images 5 - 8

Somewhere Harmony (2004)

Site- specific installation, Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, NY

Commission, 2004 Biennial exhibition

1200 feet of Plexiglas tubing and plastic tubing, lenses, mirrors, light, wire, speakers, computer, soundtrack, existing architecture.