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Charles Danby: You have just returned from a foreign residency organised by Gasworks in London. Can you talk about where you were and how it was?

Ben Judd: I was based in Cali, the third largest city in Colombia. It's at the top end of the Andes where they split into three mountain ranges, and close to the Pacific coast. The city was a mixture of old colonial architecture and contemporary buildings. Music was everywhere, 24 hours a day, which sometimes made it hard to sleep.

CD: How did things unfold?

BJ: I knew that I wanted to investigate local groups involved in different aspects of folklore. My previous work has largely been about my relationship to groups, whether as participant, observer or somewhere in between. With this work I wanted to create my own group, but I also wanted to retain an external relationship to it. I worked at an art space called Lugar a Dudas. Translated from Spanish it means 'Room for Doubt', which is both an interesting name for a space and completely relevant to my practice. It was a very active and social space that attracted a large number of artists. In terms of set-up, it didn't directly compare to anything that I had come across elsewhere which was refreshing.

CD: What was your starting point for the work?

BJ: I began by looking at guerrilla groups and other insurgent factions that are a part of the ongoing civil war in Colombia. I became interested in their logos and graphic material, and these fed into designs that emerged later during the residency. I had a breakthrough when I met a woman called Veronica. She would come to the space on a regular basis. As she was considered a little crazy no one paid much attention to her, but the gallery operated an open door policy so she was never turned away. Her outsider edge appealed to me, and by absolute chance she had created her own one-person religion that she called the 'Ministry of Universal Culture'. She had written a handbook with a manifesto and a number of lyrical sections that referred to her ideas and beliefs. Her ideology was largely idealistic: she wanted to bring everyone together. On the one hand this was really wonderful and on the other it didn't really mean anything. It was this double-edged meaning, or complete lack of meaning within what she was doing, that appealed to me. Once I showed interest in her ideas she started to refer to me as her 'Minister from London'. This had charm, but I wanted to be careful not to collude with her or accentuate her fantasy. So I had to keep reminding her that I was just an artist.

CD: How did things move on from there?

BJ: I gathered together a group of people to help me to construct and build my movement. I worked with an architect, fashion designer, jewellery maker and a

furniture maker on designing buildings, clothes, artefacts and objects. I also commissioned a graphic designer to make a logo for the movement. The design included the words *Yo Te Curaré*, which translates as 'I Will Heal You'. I used it as a way to establish an identity for the movement that everyone working for it could respond to and have ownership of. I also used it to replace all the original signage at Lugar a Dudas to further authenticate the power and presence of the group. I wanted the movement to appear believable, and I also started to write my own manifesto. I didn't ever want the movement to be a religion as such but I did want it to have an ambiguity that had spiritual or religious connotations.

CD: The building for the movement certainly has that ambiguity in its design. It seems very reverential but also quite sci-fi. The chairs and clothes you had made also seem to fit into this.

BJ: A reference point for the design of the building came through the work of French neoclassical architect Étienne-Louis Boullée, particularly his *Cénotaphe à Newton* of 1784. I wanted the form of the building to be dictated by its function, so we developed the idea that people would enter it from below, creating a sense of pilgrimage, and would emerge underground via a central staircase that would lead to a central 'enlightenment' chamber. I wanted the design to retain a slight mystery. In the same way the clothes were ambiguous; they were quite hippy in design and quite sci-fi. They also looked like American native Indian outfits, which in many ways I thought was spot on. At the same time as people were making these things I went off to meet various people from around the city who had their own distinct set of beliefs. One was a witch. Visiting her was a difficult decision because I was aware that a lot of people felt strongly about witchcraft. I think that while witches are part of the fabric of the culture and people have respect for them, they also have a lot of fear.

CD: What was your experience with the witch?

BJ: The way she worked was by making you feel really bad about yourself. She would tell you terrible things about your past and very personal things, and in part she was quite accurate. She then used this ill feeling to implicate a cleansing ritual to purge things that, by that point, you felt so bad about.

CD: What did this cleansing ritual involve?

BJ: For the first part I had to strip naked and rub lemons and eggs over my body. The next part involved me standing in a circle surrounded by lemons and eggs placed on piles of sugar. I had to stand with my eyes closed and repeat the Lord's Prayer. She then set fire to the circle.

CD: That sounds quite severe. Was there a point at which you were aware that you were surrounded by flames?

BJ: When she first lit it, it was a huge shock because I really had no idea that that was what she was going to do. I wasn't meant to open my eyes but I had to because the heat was so intense. It was terrifying but all I could do was carry on until it was over. It's amazing that simple raw materials used in this way can have such an extreme effect. It was traumatic. The thing that I still don't know is whether this effect was generated purely through the witch's power of suggestion or if it was to do with something else. If it was something else, then I am left thinking that witchcraft works; the fact that I really don't know I find absolutely intriguing. It had an enormous impact on me for days afterwards and I felt absolutely dreadful both physically and emotionally. I remember that when I returned to the space, people were worried at how ill I looked. It was quite extreme.

CD: Who else did you meet?

BJ: I met a parapsychologist and a Scientologist. The way that the Scientologist worked was by boring you to death. He went on and on for about two and a half hours just showing diagrams and playing clips from L. Ron Hubbard's video, after which you did feel completely brainwashed. Ultimately I was more interested in the witch, I liked the idea that my relationship to her mirrored her relationship to her world. I came to see my visits to these people as my research for the movement, and that's why I ended up calling the video I made my promotional video for the movement.

CD: In the video there are a number of musicians. You described Cali as a city with constant music, so can you talk about the influence and use of music?

BJ: The music is another layer. Veronica's movement had a fantastically eclectic feel to it and I wanted mine to have that, too. The music was certainly about adding but it was also about transforming original meaning. I gave transcriptions of the conversations that I had with the people I visited to a series of musicians and asked each of them to write a song. I liked the idea that meaning could be transformed and twisted into something very different, something lyrical and beautiful. There is one line – 'He'll have in the circle the definitive cure; Nobody can stand naked the impact of the heat'. It's a great lyric but it simply referred to the witch telling me that I had to be clothed when standing in the circle of fire. I liked the idea that ordinary and straightforward pieces of language could be made to sound prophetic. It was an extension of other ideas.

CD: Aside from your experience with the witch, were there other unexpected occurrences?

BJ: Something that was strange was that Veronica managed to get a slot on local television. I found her fantastically inspirational in the way that she tirelessly promoted her Ministry of Universal Culture. We both ended up on television and, I guess predictably, she used the opportunity to promote me as her Minister from London. It must have made very strange viewing: we both said completely contradictory things. Veronica kept saying that I was her Minister from London, and I

would have to say “No, that’s wrong, I’m here making a piece of work about you”. But oddly these things seemed to complement each other. It summed up a lot about what I was thinking in terms of contradiction and affirmed my position as a participant while simultaneously not being a participant.

CD: That sounds stressful.

BJ: For all the awkwardness I genuinely liked her and there were times when she really accelerated the work. She would appear from nowhere and would say “Ben, I’ve just invented the universal dance”. And she would demonstrate it and want to teach it to me, and I would film her teaching it to me. The next day she would appear with a mathematical equation for ‘universality’ that she had written: it would be fantastical but simultaneously precise and logical. She had a huge amount of energy for her beliefs and I really respected that.

CD: There seems to be a performative aspect to this work that is more explicit than in previous pieces. You appear in the work whereas previously your presence has been ‘unseen’, largely through voice-overs and narration. The use of first-person narration in these works, “I love the way...I miss the way...”, placed the viewer in the position of voyeur. Here, you retain that third-party distance; in creating a movement or religion that invokes a ‘higher’ or ‘unseen’ power, but simultaneously you enable yourself to appear in the work.

BJ: I think that’s right, in previous work my intervention has largely been enacted through a series of voice-overs that provoke an almost imagined level of intervention in terms of what is being seen. With this work I wanted to put myself directly into the work and to join these belief systems. I wanted to add dimension and I really enjoyed it. I think that I built up the idea of the movement so much, and had so many collaborators on board, that a performative outcome became inevitable. There was an amazing sense of build up prior to the opening night. More and more things were being made, the space was being transformed, and at that stage I knew that if I wanted this thing to be believable then the ultimate conclusion was wearing the outfits and becoming the work. The project culminated in inviting people to visit the movement. This became an effective way to express the contradiction and dual function that I wanted within the work. People were invited to join the movement but also warned that it was a sham and that they should stay away. The manifesto for the movement was contradictory throughout. It was read in English and Spanish, so everything fed into this idea of a duality. It created a rhythm that in some way echoed the techniques of repetition adopted by many of the individuals and groups that I had been involved with.

CD: In line with the words used in the logo, you titled the movement ‘I Will Heal You’. This assenting statement seems closely related to the affirmations or mantras that occur in previous works, whilst also evoking a ‘divine’ sentiment. The statement also seems to echo the would-be promises of the people that you met with, encapsulating neatly something both universal and hollow.

BJ: Yes, the title continues the notion of dualism. I was putting myself in the position of a divine character who could heal, but simultaneously placing myself in the hands of various people and asking to be healed. What does it really mean to heal someone or for someone to want to be healed? Everybody wants to feel better about themselves, and will buy into or construct their own belief systems in order to do so, and this is precisely what I did in Colombia. I think the process involves a certain amount of delusion for both the healer and their subject, but if you buy into it, if you believe in it enough, then unexplained things really can happen, as I found out.