

## **Karen Russo: Beyond Belief**

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It is difficult to know what to believe. Two men sit at a table. One begins to speak about an object that he cannot see, recording impressions that he attempts to interpret as visual manifestations of a thing, a place, a landscape. At the end of this process, a document that represents the object the man was attempting to describe is revealed to him. There are strong correspondences between the source and his description, which cannot be dismissed as coincidental. What have we just witnessed? It is difficult to know what to believe.

Karen Russo's artworks are always about the limits of human knowledge. Or, to put it another way, they are always about the limit that *is* human knowledge. Russo continually explores the border, or the dividing line, between what is accepted as the legitimate expression of culture and civilised existence, and what falls outside of it, is excluded, expelled or repressed from it. Art, for Russo, can explore this border because, in secular society, it is itself a space in which what exceeds rationality and order can be given shape. Russo's work uses art's own often marginal status to examine those other forms of social and psychological existence that modern culture holds beyond its borders.

Often these borders are explicitly physical ones, but ones which are loaded with symbolic, metaphorical or mythological significance. It is the border which exists, for example, between the world above ground, and the world below the surface - the subterranean spaces of the sewer, or of the catacomb, or of the cave. These are the spaces of all that is excluded from the living world above; of the excrement of living

matter, of the lifeless matter of the dead, and of the forgotten history of humanity's own primitive origins.

Such are the spaces to be found in videos such as *Economy of Excess* (2005) and *The Point of Departure* (2006). In *Economy of Excess*, a momentary view of the ordinary, modern world – the surface of a Tarmac road, trees, cars, a workman's boots, white daylight – slides away as the camera descends into a sewer passage, to begin a journey further and further into a half-lit world of organic decay, in which the only active process is the slow accretion of dead residue. In *The Point of Departure*, we find ourselves in an art gallery, turning around the sculpture of a classical figure, until our view is accelerated towards the floor. Slipping impossibly through the foundations, the camera emerges in subterranean passages, arcades, water channels. Occasionally the camera appears above ground, to see brief glimpses of urban architecture, before falling back into the shadows, moving back into history from the pipe-work and concrete of the modern underworld, through mediaeval catacombs to the cave paintings of prehistory.

These may be explicitly physical borders, that can be probed with the technology of the camera, but these are spaces that equally represent cultural and psychological limits, in which the literal and the metaphorical cannot easily be distinguished. This is perhaps why Russo's exploration of the "subterranean" criss-crosses the literal borders of above and below, at the same time as delving into the psychological division of conscious and subconscious, and of the interiority of the individual self confronted with the exteriority of social existence. In projects such as the documentation of her encounter with the "mole man" of Hackney, William Lyttle, Russo focuses on the life of individuals who in various ways are defined by their precarious connection to orthodox reality. Lyttle is the archetypal eccentric:

secluded, introverted, he became notorious for his habit of excavating tunnels beneath and around his house in east London, provoking various collapses of the pavements and roads adjacent.

Lyttle's excavations were his own act of creative self-fulfilment, putting him in conflict with conventional, everyday life. It is a position in which terms such as creativity, eccentricity and madness become blurred, terms which are of course closely associated with the legacies of the romantic conception of the artist. Russo's work reflects on how that vision of the artist has itself been forced "underground." The romantic model of the artist – desire-driven, spontaneous, self-destructive and unbound by social orthodoxy – survived until the end of the modernist period. In the epoch of artistic modernity, the romantic view of the artist was sustained in expressionism and primitivism, and was further extended, with the growing influence of Freudian psychoanalysis, into strands of surrealism and in the interest given to the art of "outsiders" and of the insane.

Russo's work, however, encounters the romantic concept of the artist in the era of post-conceptualism, a period in which art has largely suppressed those romantic and modernist legacies of the visionary artist. Where once the artist's existential non-conformism offered the model of a human being freed from the constraints of social limits, such promise has degenerated into a sort of cultural caricature, now only occupied by the spectacular absurdity of the celebrity artist.

But if those ideas no longer appear central to the contemporary definition of the artist, their "secular" remnants still thrive in other aspects of life. In her 2007 video *Insiders*, Russo conducts interviews with artists and with convicted prisoners. Filmed in silhouette against the daylight of a window, her subjects discuss their attitudes

towards life, their own personalities, their varying sense of estrangement or exclusion from the society which they inhabit, and their experience of anger, failure and fulfilment. Their voices often camouflaged, artists and prisoners are often indistinguishable in their expression of their disillusion with the conformities of general society, just as much as those of the orthodox art-world. What emerges is a picture of how individuals negotiate their marginality, and how art offers a practice of living that regulates the individual's antagonism towards general circumstances.

Russo's "insiders," those "put inside" the prison and those who are "inside" the art-world, share the common status of the marginal individual. What distinguishes them is only the way in which their socially disruptive impulses and attitudes have happened to take shape: the prisoners could have made art, the artists might have instead committed a crime. Indeed, the ironic subtext of *Insiders* is how art is proposed as a form of rehabilitation for criminals. What the work suggests instead is that, those designated as criminals or as artists share the same antagonisms, are troubled by the same frustrations towards civilised life. Instead of acting as a vehicle for the reform of those hostile instincts towards the social, *Insiders* suggests that art acts both as a channel for, and a form of containment of those disruptive forces in people that tend to threaten the social order.

In their separate ways, these works all point to the common core of Russo's work. With the architectural subjects, what is at stake is the architectural partition of the modern human world, with its division between the privileged constructions that exist above ground, and the darker, hidden and subterranean networks that it relies on. With the "mole man" what becomes significant is the division between the conditions of urban social normality and the reckless, impulsive creative act of the outsider, the man who separates himself from human company, even to the point of becoming a

burrowing animal. And with the *Insiders*, it is the psychological division within human beings, between conformity to the collective requirements of a community, and the eruption of desire and egoistic impulse in individuals, which presents itself as an energy which threatens the cohesion of the whole, and which must be subjected to control and containment.

But if all these can be seen as different forms of "division," that division is not solid or immutable. Rather, it is a borderline in constant flux, where conflicting energies of ordering and disordering, of coherence and incoherence, are constantly at work. Russo's work does not seem concerned to celebrate the dark and the disorderly aspects of human experience as things that would triumph over a supposedly repressive order; that would, in fact, be too romantic a view. Rather, Russo's work continuously exposes everything that is habitually occluded, put out of sight, not as a righteous act of rebellion against a repressive normality, or to promote that which is hidden, but to reveal the dynamic continuously at work in the human world, in which a form of life, society and culture takes shape, and by taking shape always leaves an excess, or a remainder which it cannot incorporate. That remainder might be the egoistic impulses of individuals acting against the collective good. Or it might be in the architectural confrontation between the public and the visible and the private and the hidden. Or it might be the tension between reason and unreason, between science and mysticism.

In her newest works involving individuals who practice the technique of Remote Viewing, Russo brings her exploration of the border-land between the coherent world and the unknowable world to the field of modern scientific knowledge. Remote viewers, adherents of a technique developed during the high-point of research into psychic human abilities and extra-sensory perception during the 1970s, claim that all

human beings have the capacity to perceive, at a distance, aspects of the physical world. Rather than offer her Remote Viewer collaborators the usual targets of geographical locations on the world's surface, the "targets" she selects are either entirely inaccessible (as with the surface of the moon in the 2009 video *Target: 090313 977*), or turn out to be works of art. In *On a Clear Day We Can See Forever* (2008) Remote Viewer Paul O'Connor is tasked to view a drawing made by Russo of a fictitious scene. The correspondences between O'Connor's perceptions and the drawing are remarkable. Even more remarkable is the subject of *Yesterday's Paradox, Today's Reality* (2008), in which Russo's collaborators suggest that they attempt to Remote View a work of art to be produced by Russo in the near future.

In the most recent work, *Target 090313 412* (2010), Russo has O'Connor target not an image or a place, but an abstract painting by the Russian avant-garde painter Wassily Kandinsky, *Variagation in the Triangle* (1927). O'Connor's projection, while attempting to describe the shape as a form of a three-dimensional structure, is nevertheless strangely accurate in how significant forms correspond between the absent painting and the structure he believes he perceives.

With the Remote Viewing works, Russo creates a form of analogical correspondence between the limit of art and the limit of science. Here, what is at stake is the point at which artistic "imagination" corresponds with an entirely different concept of how the mind forms an image. Remote viewing's claim to "see" with the mind – what appears to be an act of mental "visualisation" - intersects with the artist's ability to generate form not from direct observation, but from the human mind's capacity to produce images for itself. The question that Russo's Remote Viewing project poses is whether, in fact, the process of visualisation, of perceiving experience and form which does not presently exist, is a faculty common to *both* artists and Remote

Viewers, in which imagination is interchangeable with the terms of a form of extra-sensory perception.

There is no point in arguing whether Remote Viewing is "real" by the standards of orthodox science. Controversy has flared up regularly regarding the verifiability and consistency of results in experiments conducted over the last thirty years, and there is little reason to think that it will be resolved soon. Like many areas of investigation into apparently inexplicable and supposedly paranormal phenomena, remote viewing exists at the margins of orthodox scientific knowledge. But Russo's experiments do not insist that they present proof, or make a demand that we believe what we are witnessing. Instead, they renew our curiosity into the buried legacies of the romantic and modernist conception of artistic subjectivity, by bringing them into contact with forms of modern activity that appear to have nothing with art, but in some way continue an issue that had been abandoned in the historical development of modern art. After all, Kandinsky maintained an enduring commitment to a form of abstraction which he believed connected to a "spiritual" dimension in human existence. What, we might wonder, was it that Kandinsky could "see" through or beyond the forms of his abstraction?

By returning the Remote Viewer's projection of Kandinsky's painting to other artists who are her contemporaries, Russo closes the loop she has opened between the history of modernist art, contemporary para-science and contemporary art. By passing O'Connor's description to three artist friends, without revealing the original, and asking them to produce a response only to the description, Russo adds a further layer of translation and projection. It is not accidental that she has chosen three artists – Shezad Dawood, Mark Titchner and Jeremy Millar – whose different practices address questions of religion and spirituality, para-psychology and

mysticism and their relation to both modernist art and secular modernity. In their responses, each artist freely projects his own preoccupations and interests: Dawood thinks the description suggests a sort of temple, atop a mountain from which issues a waterfall. *Alamut* was the name of the fortress of Hassan-i Sabbah, the 11th century Persian Ismaili, founder of the order of Assassins, to whom is attributed the aphorism "Nothing is true, everything is permitted." It is a statement that became a slogan of the Beat Generation, through the writing of William Burrows. Burrows' fellow Beat writer Bryon Gysin apparently visited Alamut in 1972. By an odd coincidence, Mark Titchner's response to the reading involves putting himself into a trance, using a "dream machine," the meditation device first designed by Gysin. Jeremy Millar's sculptural structure makes reference to the Kabbalah myth of the "metatron," a configuration of circular forms organised to produce the schema of an immaterial cube, in which geometric and "minimalist" forms converge.

"There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Shakespeare's Hamlet declares, having seen a ghost. In her continuous examination of the borderland where the certainty of human knowledge begins to falter, Russo works to keep open a consciousness of what is unknown or unperceivable within human experience, while retrieving that which is forgotten or repressed. Working back to the underworld of human history, or into the margins of human psychology and society, or towards the limit where human science turns into faith or revelation, Russo places at the centre the figure of the artist. Rediscovering the lost philosophical history of the artistic subject through the non-artistic forms of the present, Russo proposes that art might still be able to point to the limit of human experience and belief, and then beyond it.



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