Harwood, Graham [GB]

Biographie (FR)

Harwood est connu pour son travail collaboratif 'Rehearsal of Memory' (1995) produit avec des patients sous sécurité maximale(Collection permanente du Centre Pompidou et du Musée National d'Art Moderne) et comme membre fondateur du groupe Mongrel. Mongrel est célèbre pour les projets National Heritage et Natural Selection qui exploraient la racialisation et les nouvelles formes d'eugénisme. Il est associé de près à la naissance du social software et du software art à travers le développement de Linker, HeritageGold et BlackLash. Harwood a passé ces dernières années aux Pays-Bas où il a travaillé avec la Waag Society et Imagine IC sur la construcion de Nine(9), un outil collaboratif qui célèbre les vies de ceux qui sont exclus du mainstream culturel. Il vit et travaille aujourd'hui à Southend-on-Sea avec Matsuko (une autre membre fondatrice de Mongrel) et leur fils Lani où ils continuent leurs recherches.

About the work

Rehearsal of Memory is an interactive program that took place over several months in 1995. Harwood's program was a provocative and realistic re-creation of lives of inmates at the Ashworth Maximum Security Mental Hospital, near Liverpool, England. (The program used an anonymous computer personality to reflect the collective experience of the group.) These patients include serial killers, potential suicides and other casualties of society considered either a danger to themselves or to others. Harwood also worked with experienced, trained nurses and orderlies in the facility.

According to the artist, this work is about "the recording of the life experiences of the client group that [is] a mirror to ourselves ('normal society') and our amnesia when confronted with the excesses of our society. This forgetting is a dark shadow cast by plenty; a nightmare for some that constructs misinformation and fear about insanity, violence and victims. This mental space is occupied by the psycho, the nutter, the mad dog and Bedlam. This is the space where strong fictions lie and invisibly glue together the mirror from which we view our own sanity. This work is about people everywhere who are trying to remember the faces of the extras in the cinema of history. This Artwork is a rehearsal of memories not quite forgotten."

Harwood's description of the piece boldly contrasts the actions of these patients with those of war veterans who have killed and feel little remorse, thus raising important questions about good and evil, the normal and the abnormal. *Rehearsal of Memory* also demonstrates that technology plays a key role in social control, that "computers as a primary technology can give us a safe distance from difficult decisions: whether they be deciding which patients to treat, which to leave to die, or which employees are surplus to production. Whether we agree or not, the modern machine is currently perceived as a neutral decision-making space. This image of anonymity creates a sufficient distance from events to create a situation in which we are ritually free to give up our ability to feel the consequences of our actions."

--Barbara Lee Williams,
Leonardo/ISAST Awards Committee chairperson

About his CD-ROM production called ROM
Rehearsal of Memory
The production of this interactive programme has been commissioned by Video Postive 1995 and the construction of the artwork is set to take place during January to April 1995.

The aim of the piece is to work with a group of people from Ashworth Maximum Security Mental Hospital to produce an interactive programme embodying the life experience of those involved. This is manifested in the form of an anonymous computer personality made up of the collective experience of the group.

Ashworth Mental Hospital is located in the north of England near Liverpool and is home and prison to people who are a danger to themselves or to people outside the hospital. The group of patients I am working with ranges from serial killers to rapists, potential suicides, and casualties of the excesses of society. The staff I am working with include psychiatric nurses of twenty years experience and orderlies.

This artwork is about the recording of the life experiences of the client group that are a mirror to ourselves ("normal society") and our amnesia when confronted with the excesses of our society. This forgetting is a dark shadow cast by plenty, a nightmare for some that constructs misinformation and fear about insanity, violence and victims. This mental space is occupied by the psycho, the nutter, the mad dog and Bedlam, this is the space where strong fictions lie and invisibly glue together the mirror from which we view our own sanity.

This work is about people everywhere who are trying to remember the faces of the extras in the cinema of history.

This Artwork is a rehearsal of memories not quite forgotten.

Evil, sleazy, dirty, dangerous, sick, immoral, crazy, or just plain normal. Returning home at night I can turn a light bulb on or off at will, or even decide when I want to go to bed. My home, one flat in fifty x 5,000 = anonymity. Freedom: I can peel a potato with a knife; I can wake up angry or sad without fear of scrutiny or being involuntarily chemically altered. This apparent safety has recently been nudged out of its complacency. I lay down, stroke my girlfriend's face, talk to my dog, the luxury of the common place has a background music of questions.

When I think of such persons as the murderer, the rapist, the mentally ill, common sense tells me that such people really are evil. But where did I get this common sense from? How did I come to know that the acts of some people are sick, while the acts of others I accept as normal? Is it that these people behave in a more dangerous or destructive fashion than other people? I used to think so...

Travelling to Ashworth Mental Hospital buy train 1st February 1995 A quiet middle age man smoking a pipe looks up at me. He's reading a copy of Philosophy Today, and as I find out later he is lecturing at Warwick University and freelances as a management consultant to some very big companies.

"What are you reading"
"Oh, it's about Memory and Amnesia"
"Work or fun?"
"I'm trying to get some background for a project that I'm doing at Ashworth Mental Hospital."
"That's where Ian Brady is isn't it."
Yawn. "Yeah, that's right"
"I've killed quiet a few people in the past, when I was in the army. I don't value human life in itself: individuals, but not life itself."
"Didn't you worry about it?"
"What"
"Killing. From what I understand it's a pretty hard thing to get over?"
"No, they were terrorists and I had a moral right to take their life. I'd reasoned it out, you only get hung up about it, if you don't know why you're doing it."
"What do you mean reasoned it out?"
"Well, they were breaking the law and anyway the British government gave me that right... Don't get me wrong, I understood what they were doing was defending themselves from an invading army. Let me explain. If I decided to kill you I would, but only after I'd reasoned it out. I might feel bad about killing you as an individual, but not about ending your life"
"I'am more than a bit uncomfortable by being informed that my life is worthless and that a trained killer has just suggested extinguishing it."
"Let me get this right. You don't believe life in itself has value, and if the government says to kill someone who you believe is justified in their struggle defending themselves you will still kill them?"
"Yes."
"Sounds like voices in the head to me."

Murderer. Nutter. Psycho. Child abuser. Bum Bandit
. Think of the kinds of people described above. Are their behaviours truly more harmful than those of people who are normal? In many cases the answer is no. Consider the lawfully wedded husband who physically and mentally assaults his wife, his battered wife suffers as much as any victim of a convicted rapist or child abuser. Similar things might be said of the sane general whose decision to defend national honour at any price may harm society in a much worse fashion than the actions of any so-called mentally ill person.

Insanity it seems to me never exists except in relation to strong fictions of sanity. Normality is maintained by common sense, a standard by which sanity can be measured. Fictions grow from folk law, fed by the deluge of rhetoric poured out from the technology of Hollywood, the art world and the media. These electric images fill the mental spaces left by our own lack of personal knowledge about the mentally ill individual. This misinformation sentences the mentally ill to be executed, beaten brutally, fined, shamed, incarcerated, drugged, hospitalised, or even treated to heavy doses of tender loving care. But first and foremost they are excluded from passing as normal women or men. They are branded with the image of being a sicknes in society. Living specimens of what we are not, positioned within emotional and technological microscopes know as mental hospitals.

From the preceding examples we can predict that there are many forms of labelled sickness that are not more costly to society than the behaviours of people who are less likely to be labelled sick. Why are the mentally ill viewed as such? Is it because they threaten the controlling structures of those with enough power to shape the way society imagines itself? And in that imagining erect the boundary between good and bad, normal and pathological. This is the crux of the effort to understand the battle between this form of unacceptable behaviour and the social control that surround it. Social sickness is always the flip side of the coin used to procure the myth of a healthy society.

Chemical altered states. Surveillance. Forensic Testing. Medical records. You can't argue with it. That's what the computer says.

It is no accident that social control reproduces itself into technological forms. The reduction of information to binary representation leads to a levelling process of data, whether that information be psychological profiles, battle tactics, or credit card details. Here, number crunching produces an image of anonymity through its incomprehension to humans at machine level. We take no responsibility for the way the calculator adds its numbers together and in the same way we take no responsibility for the way data-bases collate information. The binary mechanism can be seen to lead to an emotionally vacant space interpreted through cathode ray tubes and clicking buttons.

In this respect computers as a primary technology can give us a safe distance from difficult decisions: whether they be deciding which patients to treat, which to leave to die, or which employees are surplus to production. Whether we agree or not, the modern machine is currently perceived as a neutral decision making space. This image of anonymity creates a sufficient distance from events to create a situation in which we are ritually free to give up our ability to feel the consequences of our actions.

Rehearsal of memory challenges our assumptions of normality and at the same time confronts us with a clean comfortable machine filled with filth, the forbidden and the demented. Its hygienic procedures contaminated with the effluent of excluded human relations. For a long time we have assigned machines our dirty laundry whilst maintaining the image of their enamelled white veneers.
Now is the time for filth.

Graham Harwood