remembering future lives

Gail Priest: MS&MR, Xerox Missive 1977/2011, AGNSW

"I DID NOT THINK THAT I SHOULD TELL FANTASY THAT THOUGHT HIS ENCOUNTER WITH GOD WAS IN FACT AN ENCOUNTER WITH HIMSELF FROM THE FAR FUTURE...FAT HAD REMEMBERED BACK TO THE STARS AND HAD ENCOUNTERED A BEING READY TO RETURN THE STARS, AND SEVERAL BEINGS ALONG THE WAY, SEVERAL POINTS ALONG THE LINE. ALL OF THEM WERE THE SAME PERSON.


MS&MR (Sébastien and Richard noise mixing) not only work collaboratively but frequently use their own relationship as their subject matter, their practice has reached wider awareness through their ongoing project Vídeo dromas for the Atono, in which they meld home video of themselves as children in the late 80s and early 90s with excerpts of their current work. Their video does not connect to the narrative of a filmic tale but instead each video seems to be an emotional anchor, grounding the relationship established long before they first met. There is a bravery and poetry to these works that appeals to the notion of true love and destiny. Their work also investigates the medium of video itself (Marshall McLuhan’s medium as message) challenging the idea of video as a truthful record of time and further using it as a kind of time-travelling device.

In Xerox Missive 1977/2011, recently exhibited at the Art Gallery of NSW Project Space, M&MSr have extended their experiments beyond their own relationship to another that seems particularly appropriate: that of science fiction writer Philip K. Dick and his fifth wife Tessa B Dick. Dick, of course, was one of the 20th century’s most prolific science fiction writers, capturing public attention more than others possibly because at some point he came to believe in what he was writing—or rather, he began to write what he was believing.

The moment of significance happened in 1974, shortly after he had married Tessa. A woman appeared at his door to deliver post-operative medication for a dental procedure. A pendant around her neck caught his attention, sending out a “pink beam” and in the stream of visions/hallucinations that followed the encounter (including the revelation of a simultaneous existence in Ancient Rome, and the presence of enlightened three-eyed aliens), Dick realized that he was living in what he described as orthogonal time—which that

strikes all of linear time simultaneously. It strikes the past, the present and future simultaneously."—SF EYE, #14. Spring 1996

For Xerox Missive M&MSr have utilised audio and video material from a speech and interview given by Dick in 1977 at a Science Fiction Convention in Mitz, France. Via fan sites they also tracked down Tessa (still living in California) who agreed to meet with the artists and, amazingly, be filmed for the project.

On one of the four screens of the installation, we see Tessa as she is now sitting at a desk in front of a microphone, waiting and smoking. Dick arrives and sits beside her and there’s an exchange—their heads turn in slow motion to almost see each other, a hand reaches out to make contact. Dick begins to deliver his speech while Tessa perches on the edge of the table, like a groupie or bodyguard. While these interactions are formal—they are ‘happening’ in the public space of a lecture room—there is an intimacy implied between the figures, a kind of comfort in each other’s presence that is uncanny.

On the opposite screen we see Dick and Tessa in close-up against a plain reddish background, a kind of no-space. Mainly we see the back of Tessa’s head but occasionally her aged hand reassuringly touches her husband on the shoulder. As the sequence progresses his features fragment and distort, breaking into shifting silvers like the facets of a diamond yet contained within the outline of his profile. As his image morphs, receding in and out of recognition, we imagine his presence slipping in and out of consciousness in different dimensions across the timeline.

On another screen is a collection of jewelery—earrings, bracelets and pendants. These items float against the same reddish background, and appear hyper-real, between photograph and illustration. Like the pendant of the strange girl at Dick’s door in 1914, they shimmer, reflecting half-frames and glints of light. On a final screen we see Tessa alone in dappled sunlight against hazy trees, slowly turning, repeating small gestures seen in other sequences. This is the Tessa of the present, alone but still seeking other dimensions.

Accompanying the video are audio snippets of both Dick and Tessa, alternating around the four speakers of the room. Dick talks of the “black-haired girl” who often appeared in his novels as a messenger, and how things he wrote actually came to pass, as though he were inventing but rather remembering.

In Xerox Missive M&MSr have reached a new stage in the development of their oeuvre. As in their earlier work, the strength lies in the interplay of form and content, but in this case the extension beyond themselves as subjects to a couple with well published philosophies on the elusiveness of time, creates an even tighter amalgamation. However above and beyond the philosophical explorations, Xerox Missive is powerful because, like the Vídeo dromas series, it tangibly evokes, via technical intervention, a sense of love and lasting connection between the onscreen protagonists. Tessa and Philip K. Dick have been separated for over 30 years and exist (arguably) in different dimensions, yet in Xerox Missive their relationship lives on, captured outside of time.
