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WARD SHELLEY

Chen Tamir

Ward Shelley's newest show at Pierogi Gallery in Brooklyn runs from April 17 to May 17, 2009. Titled "Who Invented the Avant-Garde (and other half-truths)," it's comprised of two bodies of work. In the front room are painted drawings of timelines describing various aspects of art's influence on the course of world history. These are beautiful, hand-drawn and meticulously crafted works that highlight the subjectivity of historical narrative. In the back room is a whimsical installation created with Douglas Paulson. "The Archive," here in its sixth rendition, is a floor to ceiling maze of cardboard boxes that purports to contain an archive of absolutely everything. Again using texts in a way that is both connective and classifying, this work has text in the form of amusingly creative labels on each box describing its contents. Some examples: "Fear for the honey bee," or "Murphy's law," or "Things Found Floating." Shelley is performing a piece within "The Archive" called *The Sleeper Experiment*: Shelley has set up a refrigerator-sized box in which he sleeps and makes drawings based on texts contributed by visitors, which are read to him by a computer text-to-speech program during slumber.

Ward's back had been hurting (not surprising seeing the archive of everything he's been schlepping around). Chen offered him a deep-tissue massage during which she interviewed him.



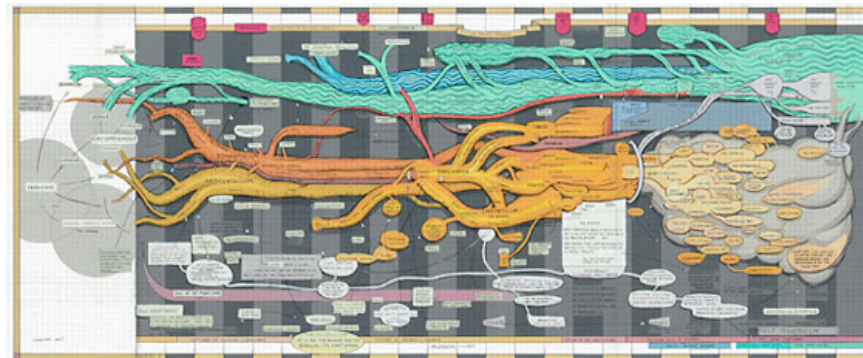
Ward Shelley and Douglas Paulson, *Archive*, 2004-09. Installation view, 880 file storage boxes and label texts.

Chen Tamir: What's it like to live in a cardboard box?

Ward Shelley: It's like a treat. I've spent a year planning this and working hard for it, and when I finally get in there, it doesn't feel like a limitation, it feels like my reward. Most people think I'm putting myself through the ringer, but I'm doing exactly what I want to do. Like a mountain climber who seems to be suffering, but is actually having the time of his life.

CT: How do you feel about this show?

WS: I feel very good about the work and the response. It took me almost ten years of working and thinking to get this together. So I didn't go about this accidentally, and I'm optimistic that the timeline paintings will continue to be of interest. The timing is not so good though, in the aftershock of the financial collapse. The crisis is partly psychological and the aspect of fear places everything that's being wheeled out right now under a pall. And yet everyone's pretty supportive and happy.



Ward Shelley, *Who Invented the Avant-Garde*, ver. 3. Oil and toner on mylar, 159 x 72 cm.

CT: Has the economic crisis affected your work directly?

WS: No. It was the economic boom, especially the raising of rent, that affected me and drove me out of New York. But those are punches I can roll with.*

[*Shelley has been priced out of both his studio and his apartment, and now lives in Connecticut]

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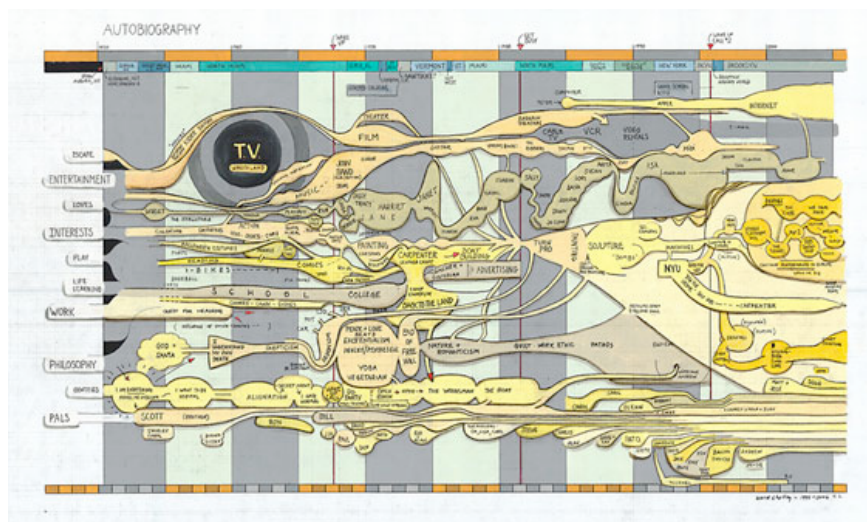
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CT: *Your work seems like it's about trying to organize the unorganizable.*

WS: "Organizing" is the right word, but it's also a construction. You fabricate your realities. That's what a conscious brain has to do, to take the information it perceives and make it not threatening by "understanding" it. I think the brain developed out of a flight or flight monitor device — to help the monkey figure out if there was danger around or if he could just keep eating. Information has to be sorted and understood. It doesn't have to be true, it just has to be made clear enough that information functions as an environment that's sensible. When new things come about they have to fit into this construction. They turn from raw perceptions into understandings organized by concepts. You don't know the truth, you just bring your understanding up from random information to understandings that work well enough for you to relax about things.

CT: *How am I doing on the massage?*

WS: Don't ever stop.



Ward Shelley, *Autobiography, ver. 2*. Oil and toner on mylar, 94 x 58 cm.

CT: *You collaborate with a lot of people, and you teach. It seems a part of your process. Is it?*

WS: I collaborate partly because it's more fun, and partly because it has more potential. At the same time I was doing visual arts in school I was doing theatre, and realized it was more fun to work with people. Theatre has served as a model for me since the '80s. I've been doing collaborative pieces as a way of accomplishing something bigger than I could do on my own. I've worked with Jesse Berkowitz and Matt Bua, and lately more with Douglas Paulson. Doug has worked in the Relational Aesthetics vein from a very early age, even in undergraduate school, and was a full-blown pioneer in many respects. He's worked in Denmark with another collective, Parfyme, and he's working with Flux Factory here in New York. I'm now working in an architectural direction with Alex Schweder on a project that came out of "Flatland" at the Sculpture Center called "Stability."

CT: *Do you feel like a mentor to them?*

WS: I can trace things in their work that I can make a strong case for having influenced, but I don't think you need to see things as cause and effect. They certainly have influenced me too. It's a fiction that we like — to be able to find an origin, like the man who brought the fire — but things are too complicated for such myths. You'll always be able to find someone who did something earlier. That's what I've learned by doing these history drawings. They're both fictional and supportable. Histories are group consensus stories about who we are and where we came from. We just need a story that's good enough. "Jackson Pollock invented the drip." Ok, let's leave it there. Someone came in today and told me about a Pollock-like artist whom Clement Greenberg visited four years before Pollock, and she never got any credit. We just want a bit of credit, but in the end it doesn't really matter.

CT: *Were you influenced by Mark Lombardi?*

WS: No. I had already done some of these drawings beforehand. I took them into the Drawing Center, and a couple of months later Mark had a show there. He probably had a jump up on me, but I had been working on them for years. It makes perfect sense because that's how things happen. Ideas are in the air. That might be a fiction too, but it's one that makes more sense to me. Mark had real success with them, and that influenced me to stop doing them because I would always be compared to him. The superficial similarity is there. I came back to them after doing the Williamsburg timeline drawing in 2000 that celebrated the new Brooklyn art scene, and everyone was so supportive that we did a print run. I realized I had something that allowed me to use a part of my personality — to tell stories and lecture — that I couldn't do with normal visual arts, which aren't normally a good method for telling stuff you already know. Art is a good way for finding out the things you don't know yet, i.e. searching and discovering. When a work tells you things it knows, it sounds pedantic and tedious and appeals only to the people who are going "right on, that's speaking for us." So when I decided to do these rhetorical drawings, I knew I was getting into a risky field because it could sound didactic. I spent a lot of time trying to make them entertaining and seductive and open-ended and fun, and not too pedantic or didactic, even though they still tell a history. To augment this body of work, I do the live-in

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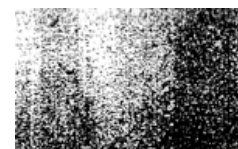
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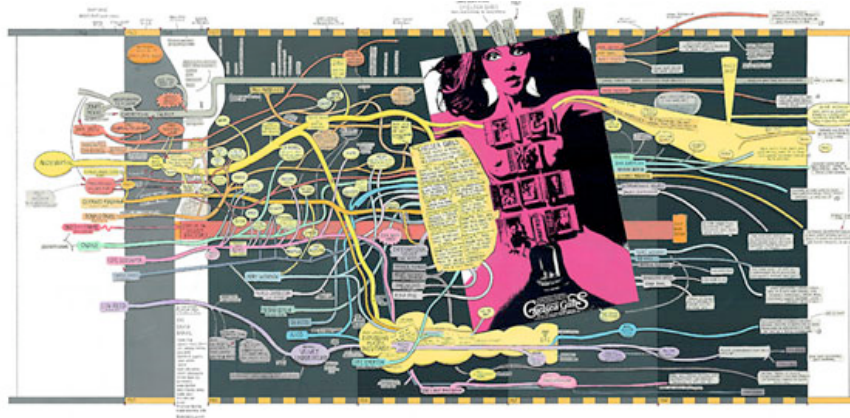
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Ward Shelley, *Andy Warhol-Chelsea Girls, ver. 1*. Oil and toner on mylar, 147 x 77 cm.

CT: Do you consider the live-in works “relationally aesthetic”?

WS: I didn't enter into that movement, which I think is offering a different emphasis on something that was already happening. I come from a different generation. It's one with a social interest, but I'm interested in the individual artist representing his or her view of the world.

CT: “The Archive” has had six lives already. How does it change over time?

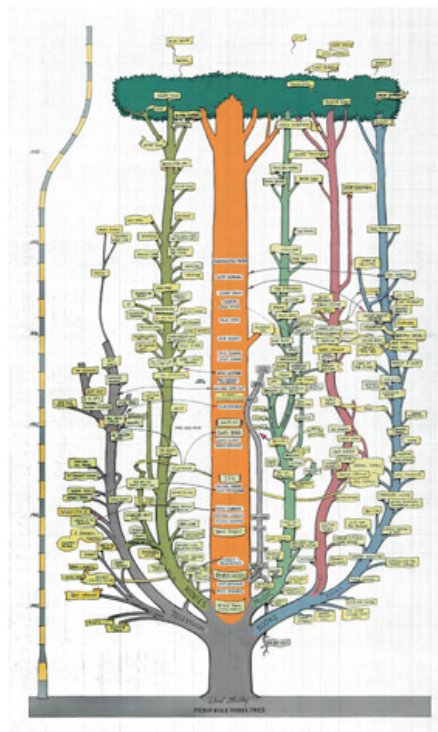
WS: The original Archive, in Bonn, was supposed to be lived in, but the room we were supposed to be in wasn't available, and we couldn't inhabit it. Then the label themes grew to be more important than the architecture. Now I'm finally living inside it. Its context has changed: There was one show about artists studios. There was another called “Slightly Unbalanced,” about psychic disorders and the Archive was seen as something made by a hoarder, with Collyers syndrome, though it was originally conceived as simply an externalization of the mind. There is a lot of personality in these labels, and a lot of strategies employed to make them surprising from one to the next and still have continuity.

CT: Can you turn over on your back please. How's the massage so far?

WS: You've got very gifted hands.

CT: Is there anything else you want Flash Art readers to know?

WS: The idea that's underlying the performance work is that one's sense of meaningfulness develops out of personal investment and effort. Also about having an option to design your life around absurd ideas. When you work with an absurd idea, it gets drained of its small meanings and you're left with just the big meanings. You're left with nothing but its purpose and function, instead of its practical connection.



Ward Shelley, *Media Role Models, ver. 1*. Oil and toner on mylar, 61 x 104 cm.



That said, it's about a subject-object relation, i.e. how you create the world in your mind. It's a feedback cycle. It never stops. It demonstrates how the world is both a malleable and permeable construction, where the true outside world is quantitative or qualitative, and the information that comes from you is interpretive. Interpretations come from the outside world as well because you are exposed to other people's interpretations. It's very interesting and cognitive. I've been thinking about these things since the late '60s and I haven't been bored since. I keep picking away at what the next layer will be.

CT: *What are you working on next? What are you excited about?*

WS: I have a couple of projects that are 'habitational.' They always sound stupid so I won't describe them or else I'll start to think they're stupid too. The drawings I'm working on have to do with consumer critique. I'm interested in culture as a product. I'll be looking at culture products, such as pornography, sci-fi, kitchen appliances and advertising, and putting those into timelines.

Chen Tamir is a curator and writer based in New York, and sometimes Toronto and Tel-Aviv. She is also the director of Flux Factory, an arts organization in Queens. She has been interviewing drunk people about art. This is her first massage interview.

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