

John Muse &
Jeanne Finley

O NIGHT WITHOUT OBJECTS

BY ISABEL SADURNI



THE CAR KEYS ARE MISSING. "IF I WERE A REAL artist," says San Francisco-based video artist John Muse, checking the underbelly of a stack of mail, "I would have created an inexpensive strategy for transporting art installations to the gallery that doubled as a airport shuttle for my girlfriend, but instead, I rented a \$200-a-week car, and now we've lost the keys."

Jeanne Finley, experimental filmmaker, video artist, Fulbright scholar, Guggenheim fellow, and long-time collaborator with Muse, helps him look. She is back in town for a screening of their latest video, *O Night without Objects: A Trilogy*, and the gallery opening of the companion installation. A long-time San Franciscan, she currently lives in Brooklyn and has a teaching gig at New York University. Finley stirs a bowl of keys to investigate. Somehow this overturning of personal objects and retracing of steps to find "the key" parallels

the method by which Finley and Muse's *O Night without Objects* came into being.

"Ten years ago, I found *The Adventures of Blacky* in a thrift store in Roanoke, Virginia, in the middle of nowhere," says Muse, referring to a package of psychological test cards centered around the hypothetical situations of a cartoon black cocker spaniel. (For instance, they ask, "Here Blacky is licking herself. Who might Blacky be thinking about here? Is Blacky afraid? What will Mama say if she finds Blacky?") "When I found it, I didn't take it seriously," Muse recalls. A decade later, the thrift store object became the prompt for *O Night without Objects*, which comprises three thematically-linked episodes that explore the (re)construction of family, hate speech (and its reversibility), and the rituals of conversion. As the videomakers describe the trilogy, "*Blacky* narrates the administration of a psychological test to a young girl. *Based on a Story* explores the conversion and death of Nebraska's KKK Grand Dragon after his harassment and subsequent friendship with the local Cantor. And *Time Bomb* tells of a young girl's experience at a Baptist camp."

At first, Finley recalls, "We didn't know what to do with [*The Adventures of Blacky*], even though we talked about it a lot.

Then in 1992, we read about the Trapp-Weisser story in *Time* magazine and considered how we might tie the two together." The now Disney-optional narrative tells the story of Larry Trapp, a former KKK Grand Dragon, who is adopted into Rabbi Weisser's family and subsequently converts to Judaism. Muse expands, "The Weisser-Trapp story is about Larry's recreation of a childhood and the family he never had. This idea is carried through in *Time Bomb*, which begins with a girl alone, who, through relationships of power, finds acceptance. So each story retraces the conversion theme, in its own way."

Several earlier incarnations of *O Night without Objects* helped galvanize its purpose and execution as a now powerful, hour-long trilogy, which has screened at New York's Museum of Modern Art and Lincoln Center, the Pacific Film Archives, and a number of festivals. An

early manifestation was an outdoor, site-specific installation for the Mill Valley Film Festival that used public telephones, mail, cable access, and outdoor projection to mimic the channels of communication used by Trapp and the Weissers.

This was followed by a screening at the Pacific Film Archives of the *Adventures of Blacky* segment. It was during this public moment that the videomakers realized they were dissatisfied with their cut. ("You can tell people it's okay to fail in front of large groups of people," assures Muse). The duo subsequently restructured and layered these disparate parts into the trilogy. More recently, it has taken new shape as a three-dimensional sculpture/video installation.

"It was great to see what we were able to do with an installation," says Muse. While the narrative track remains the same, the visual component has been split apart and amplified, becoming even more textured. A huge pile of pencil shavings sits at the center of the gallery floor under a hobbled classroom chair, pointing to the process of "inscription" or the influence of others on one's identity. Mirrored relief etchings of *The Adventures of Blacky* cards are in one room and blinking colored slides in another. "What we've done is to separate into two image channels the cards themselves being shown to a young girl, and the girl's flight of fancy, where one escapes when being bombarded by the demands of an authority as a test-giver," Finley explains.

The video also contains unrelated images of flags flapping and tree shadows that offer a rare and wonderful indulgence in visual pleasure. "People assume that visual pleasure is subservient or not a priority," explains Finley. "Within our work, visual pleasure is crucial. To take all that you're going through during shooting and to look and absorb the visual landscape into the piece through the camera is incredibly fun and essential to our working process."

Initial help from a small National Endowment for the Arts grant, followed by a residency at Xerox Parc and clever manipulations of Premiere editing programs, allowed them to stick to a bare bones budget. Muse says hopefully, "If we can get funding, we'd like to add a third channel for our narrator, Pamela Z, to explore the racialization of voice. We've also talked about finding more ways to explore video as sculptural medium. And Finley has an idea for a fictional feature film on shoplifting.

"No, not a feature," says Finley.

"Oh, no. Too commercial." Muse laughs.