

# notes on looking

Contemporary Art from Los Angeles

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Emily Mast – BirdBrain in NY & other things



## Emily Mast - Recent Work

from [Emily Mast](#) PLUS

05:01

Geoff Tuck:

Your work's sensibility seems to me very sweet, or maybe – since “sweet” has connotations that go elsewhere than I might intend – I'll say very human.

Emily Mast:

I definitely do not like the term “sweet” but it would not be the first time I've heard that term applied to my work, along with “romantic” and “cute.” I much prefer “human.” I often speak in lectures about my interest in, and investigation of, what I like to call “humanness” or that which makes us human, beyond pure intellect. So by this I guess I mean vulnerability, imperfection, emotion and commotion (and by that I mean situations that invite the potential for failure) – all things that the art world tends to shy away from, I think.

Geoff:

I'm thinking for instance, of “Bread Subscription” for which you promised a collector (participant) a homemade loaf of bread for each month of the year...

Emily:

Funny — I see this as more of a (somewhat absurd) commentary on how value is established. I have yet to sell a single subscription. People are willing to pay \$5 for a loaf of bread, but they are not willing to pay \$100 for a loaf of bread just because it has been labeled “art” — I’m not fooling anyone here!

Geoff:

...and your “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow” - for which an unannounced actor whistled the Shirrelle’s song while visiting a group exhibition, all connect to an audience through the heart, though each work could also be accepted (received) by the audience members on their own terms.

Emily:

Actually, I see this as a somewhat insidious piece, albeit one with potential for connecting through the heart. The whistler “infects” the audience in a way by planting a contagious song in their subconscious. The idea came to me when I spent nine weeks at Skowhegan in upstate Maine in 2006. I tried to infect my peers with the popular Corona song “This Is the Rhythm of the Night” by playing it repeatedly at social gatherings and by singing it wherever I went. At the end of the summer I organized a concert on a lake in which a trumpeter and a saxophonist performed an improvised duet of the song in two canoes moving in opposite directions on the lake. This insistent attitude did not make me especially popular among my peers!

Geoff:

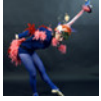
This way of presenting art contains pathos in the making (attributable to the inherent possibility of failure), and the works themselves can result in an experience of pathos by the audience.



Offending The Audience, 2011

With: Zane Amundsen, Amber Barbell, Mathew Davis, Bailey Garcia, Kaitlin Morgan, Gerald Orzikh & Talyan Wright

Image courtesy of Emily Mast



## Offending The Audience

from **Emily Mast** PLUS

39:23



Emily:

This is key to my practice: framing human vulnerability and imperfection “on stage” so to speak so that the (imperfect) audience connects empathetically and not just intellectually to the work, or the experience at hand. This is perhaps best seen in my re-staging of Peter Handke’s 1966 anti-play “Offending The Audience” in which I cast seven kids between the ages of 6 and 12 to present a very sophisticated (i.e. adult) work of avant-garde theater. The goal was to remove the audience from the artificiality of a critical discourse of artifice by introducing real play into a play that, for all its avant-garde seminality is, to a contemporary ear, far too self-conscious to be listened to. The childrens’ lack of pretense allowed the audience to experience the piece empathetically. This fresh take on Handke was not intended to resemble a conventional children’s play. Rather, it was a conceptual gesture that was staged in a conventional theater.

Geoff:

Bread is basic, it’s the stuff of life, and also a large scale manufactured product. Your presentation of this simple necessity brings bread back home from the factory...

Emily:

Yes, bread is a refrain in my work; it’s a reminder (mostly to myself) to remember to stick to the essentials, and to strive to create things and experiences that are hopefully as satisfying and gratifying as a mouthful of warm, homemade bread.

Geoff:

Similarly, the project also brings art back home. From what, in your mind? My thinking is that you remove art from the factory of production and direct our attention to the space of experience.

Emily:

It is indeed an attempt to re-focus attention on the space of experience and also on the space of exchange. I’m a pretty inwardly-focused person and I try to understand myself as a human being so that I can, in turn, better understand others. My work then becomes the avenue by which I am able to be generous, at least, that’s my hope. A community is often created in the mounting of each piece. It’s a collaborative effort in which we are all attempting to all arrive at a (hopefully meaningful) moment together in time.

Geoff:

In a separate conversation, this morning with Adam Feldmeth, he described experience of art thus: “Perhaps it is conducive to imagine that it (the experience of art) is not something that one physically moves in and out of so much as the way one recognizes (is reminded of) the atmosphere and also forgets that it is there so graciously. In this way, the art object becomes less important.”

Emily:

Yes, that's nicely put. It's true that I'm not really all that interested in the art object per se. My work is an attempt to produce meaningful moments through transitory situations rather than by transforming solid materials.

Geoff:

Your interest in making direct connections between people and art also comes up in the dance and performance works, such as in "Six Twelve One by One", or in your recent series, B!RDBRA!N. These events required large casts of players, whom you choose from particular and disparate communities. Not all of them art-related.

Emily:

At the heart of my practice is a distrust of the ideal of truth, which manifests itself through collaborations in which the co-construction of knowledge is key. By working with a diverse range of people in a very personal way, we are able to create our own truths through collective experience. I intentionally work with people who have no affiliation with art because I want to experience and include all kinds of perspectives – while I respect it, I do not want to favor an art-world perspective.

My practice exists across and between disciplines. I attach myself to writing, theater, choreography, sociology, psychology and education and use them as tools in the territory of art. Every encounter results in the creation of a visual and physical language that is completely unique to the particular exchange experienced.

Geoff:

I have been revisiting your online archive, and – tonight – watching the clip of "It will never be known how this has to be told" and searching online to learn more about the title. Seeing that piece was an incredible experience for me.



It will never be known how this has to be told, 2010, installation with sound  
& artist book, 11'11"

Installation view, courtesy of Emily Mast

Emily:

Did you see it in person at Steve Turner? (GT: *Yes – I did see it at Steve's.*) I see that show as a sort of failure in many respects, actually. I think the sound component was quite successful, but the sculptural component sort of flopped (in my opinion) because it felt like an

unnecessary accessory. The sound was more sculptural in a way than the installation, and probably would have sufficed... what do you think? (GT: *I think artists are their own worst critics. I'll allow that you found the sculpture to be a failure, but for me it was successful in drawing me in, in occupying one part of my brain while the sound worked on another.*)



It will never be known how this has to be told, 2010, installation with sound & artist book, 11'11"  
Installation view, courtesy of Emily Mast and Steve Turner Contemporary

Geoff:

The piece was super emotional – but did not rely on emotion; the structure was smart in the way that I thought about it for weeks after – my mind was bouncing around the installation, the text, the sound and also the exterior history – the newspapers had been full of the case when it took place.

Emily:

There was a very long article that came out in the New Yorker a few months before the show that spawned the idea for the piece. Initially, I wanted to present a children's play that told the story of Cameron Todd Willingham (a man who was supposedly wrongly accused of murdering his three children in a house fire), but later decided to concentrate on telling the story through one child's perspective. I wanted to focus on the process of attempting to understand and form an opinion about something that was clearly very complex, for anyone really, let alone a young child. Having a child tell a story that involved the death of children was a way of adding more layers of emotional and intellectual complexity.

Geoff:

I remember the boy's voice. He was in the first person as a boy telling, he was the second person telling of the father screaming, and in his narrative he also spoke of the father and others in the third person. My heart was engaged by the horror of the situation – of children dying, of a man, a father, condemned to die – possibly guilty, and possibly innocent; but also my brain was intrigued. The boy as a character, as a child who died and was also the over-voice in the piece became my surrogate and also possibly the "author" of the piece for me, because he spoke to me of his own experience in his own voice.

Emily:

Since the story was so grey, and so horrific – in that you could never really know “the truth” for sure, or whether the man was innocent or guilty, or whether he was even “bad” or “good” – I felt that it only made sense to retell it using the voice of someone who was truly unbiased, and someone who could be completely transparent about his relationship to the material at hand. I worked with an 8 year old boy named Alvin who was utterly charming. You can hear him forming his own opinions about what happened as he tells the story; you hear him revising his own reactions as he goes along. He was really amazing.

Geoff:

I bring “It will never be known how this has to be told” in because it is a striking, memorable piece, and because with it you make the audience look beyond easy emotion for some other understanding. I watched myself as the work captured me, I saw a glimmer appear in my eye as my brain caught up with and then outdistanced my emotions. This work did not happen to me – I participated in it.

Emily:

That’s great to hear, because that was really my goal (and continues to be the goal with the work I’m making now) – I want the viewer not to merely consume but to enter in, and engage with the work as well. I like to encourage my audiences to question the authenticity of their opinions. I use various methods to achieve this, i.e. plants, artificial audiences, canned laughter, etc. They are meant to manipulate, to some extent, the viewer’s reactions so that she is pushed to consider why she is reacting the way she is. I often set up situations in which the viewer has to compete with artificiality in order to retain an authentic point of view. Contagion, once again, is at work here.

Geoff:

Something you said earlier about “a space of continuous exchange” makes me wonder where you as the author of this piece fit in? I was able to imagine you as an artist, making – but I was so caught up that I forgot I was looking at art.

Emily:

All of my works are collaborative to some degree, whether I’m reacting to the work of another artist or working with a “real” person. I feel like I am continually redefining notions of authorship while affirming my role as an artist.

Geoff:

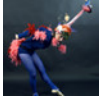
I think you must remain one of several “directors” of any of your pieces – right? Forgive me for using a word not in its typical sense – by director I mean one who gives, lends, direction to the work. In your work I think you create a structure, set it in motion and then let the parts have their sway with your design.

Emily:

I have no problem with the term “director;” however, I assume many other roles as well: instigator, producer, nurturer, editor, casting agent, choreographer, designer, builder, etc. I set up structures in which chaos (imperfection, humanness, idiosyncratic experience) can be framed – I encourage the performers I work with to inject their own individual experiences into any given piece. So, I guess you could say that I frame and direct reality, to some degree.

Geoff:

But on to B!RDBRA!N, and the show in New York. How did it come to be?



## B!RDBRA!N at REDCAT

from **Emily Mast** PLUS

36:54

**HD**

Emily:

B!RDBRA!N is a series of vignettes that form a “live collage” based on the juxtaposition of an accumulation of various, highly-aestheticized details that all relate to channels of communication in which language is problematic, challenging and/or inappropriate. Seven performers ranging in age from 8 to 68 years, explore language as a prop onto which we project meaning, language that hides or deflects meaning and all-out rebellion against words.

The performance was originally conceived of as a live response to the legacy of the historical French artist Guy de Cointet for the Getty Museum’s Pacific Standard Time Public Art & Performance Festival in January 2012. It was later developed and shown at the NOW festival at REDCAT and at Public Fiction in L.A. in August 2012. I set out to investigate and interrogate Guy de Cointet’s work while incorporating the true story of Alex, an African Gray parrot who was the subject of a thirty-year avian language experiment. What interested me was the curious overlap in the ways that both the artist and the experiment dealt with the imprecision of language and the myriad ways it can be delivered and understood.

In the piece we see a stuntman, a stutterer, a sign-language interpreter, a comedian, a child, an auctioneer and a theater director describing, transcribing, interpreting and gesturing within a landscape of vivid colorful forms that are reminiscent of de Cointet’s sets, elementary school classrooms and minimalist art.

Mark Allen of Machine Project saw the piece and was very enthusiastic about it. Machine Project is doing a residency at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation 19th Street Project Space in New York City and they invited me to present B!RDBRA!N there on September 5th, 6th & 7th to kick things off.

We are extremely excited about this opportunity because it gives the piece the rare opportunity to exist outside of LA. When you make performance work that is as ambitious (and therefore, non-portable) as this piece, it’s difficult to take it on the road. We’re currently trying to raise funds so the cast and crew can make the trip to New York. You can click on the link below to make a tax-deductible contribution. Many thanks in advance!

Geoff:

When I watched your film “B!RDBRA!N (Addendum)” at LACE, I thought of the actors as people who were trying to communicate something to me, something that they believed in the truth of, and yet also I recognized that they knew that we – they and I (and they among themselves) – speak different languages. Their efforts to communicate information would fail. I felt their earnest desire and I saw the passion in their struggle. I came away learning about communication itself, rather than learning about the purported facts as I initially understood them: Guy de Cointet, the African Grey parrot, etc.

Emily:

There is very little room for hard facts in this piece. It’s extremely grey and very subjective. It’s much more about miscommunication than it is about language or communication. I like to explore the potential in what is often considered problematic, imperfect or even uncool. I am compelled by Guy de Cointet’s stubborn obtuseness and his use of mystery, decoding and secrecy; just as I am compelled by Alex’s story and the questions surrounding the validity of his use and understanding of signs. I guess I’m into the unknown.

Information regarding **B!RDBRA!N USA Projects** launch may be found here:

[http://www.usaprojects.org/project/b\\_rdbra\\_n\\_in\\_new\\_York](http://www.usaprojects.org/project/b_rdbra_n_in_new_York)

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