

Project Summary

This "non-traditional opera" is a sequence of coextensive but discrete performances, using music as a structural element, recorded on film.

Project Description

"The Death of Spicer Breeden" is a series of performed reenactments depicting the story of Spicer Breeden, the scion of a wealthy Denver family who fatally shot himself in 1996 after a streak of indefensibly bad behavior. My intention is to re enact- metaphorically of course- the events that led to his demise. These performances are staged but not scripted, which is to say they leave open their outcomes. For this reason each 'Act' can only be conceived after the completion of the preceding one, and can only be performed once.

Sound and music will play a structural role. For example, original scored music will be incorporated into the performances as part of the narrative, sounds produced from one 'Act' will be carried over into another, and 'resonances', a specialty of Samson's (my collaborator), will be attempted between voice and sound and music.

The initial or opening Act will probably be Breeden's avowal to submit himself to rehab, and his choice to celebrate his decision by one final night of revelry. At this point, even this first performance is somewhat undefined, but I can give you a provisional idea of how it may be enacted. Using live music and sound along with my voice we will attempt to shatter some specially fabricated glassware. I will then reassemble the pieces in order to construct a primitive vessel to manage drinking from. I will crush the remaining glass using the tool set that is proprietary to the rare model BMW that Spicer owned and make a "line" drawing on the rear view mirrors which I remove from the car. Then I exit in the BMW. We will then allow elements of what occurred during the performance, including sounds, to inform the conception and staging of the following Acts.

Spicer's story barely qualifies as a tragedy in the operatic tradition but has many evocative and telling elements to it. The night of his avowal, while DUI, Breeden caused a car crash that resulted in the death of a popular newspaper columnist. Later he cloistered himself in the family mansion, blacking out the windows as media trucks, manned with colleagues of the victim, began to broadcast from the front lawn. When the last of his cocaine ran out, he scrawled a note accusing his friend, an artist, of driving the car, then shot his dog, then himself. Later the artist was tried for the crime.

My intention is to infuse this given story with the unscripted element of performative action to force a kind of evolutionary mutation in the re-enactment of it that might, somehow, redeem it.

For example, if we are unable to shatter the glassware with voice and sound, we may have to find another way to do it, complicating the performance in real time. This unexpected alteration in the story line will be further reflected in how we respond to it when conceiving later acts as we consider how it bears upon the themes of the piece: is this a failure? Were we unable to meet our own expectations? Have we acted irresponsibly? Do we have obligations? This will give us an

opportunity to bring new and unforeseeable material into the story.

In the end you will have a film. But there will also be the series of performances that effectively make up the content of the film. The performances occur maybe weeks apart in order to conceive and prepare for each one in turn. Audiences will be invited to individual Acts which will be performed 'on location', but in the public arena (or at the Outpost for Contemporary Art's galleries). The film will be the final document and the method of presenting them sequentially into a completed narrative.

My approach as an artist has been to try to model the unfolding of reality. This opera is not only a representation of something- the story of Breeden- it is simultaneously an occurrence of something as well- its reenactment. It is from the uncertainty in the outcome and consequences of each Act that the story is allowed to evolve. We will pick up on elements of how things play out and carry them on over into the next Acts, creating an emergent meta-narrative. These two forms of narrative, one given and one uncertain - maybe they can be called dramatization and performance - become entwined and inform one another, telling a new story while expurgating the old one in a cathartic embodiment of it.

I believe it is necessary to find new narrative forms to describe current realities. I want to locate a place where the question of veracity does not affect meaning. This is clearly, at this point, an artistic aim, but what I'm talking about is a different kind of relationship with information that could liberate one from the domination of "Truth" telling and fact mongering. My strategy is to demonstrate how it may be possible to act within a regime of information and not be dominated by it.

This is an artwork that explores the possibilities of another way to tell a story, but it is also about the story itself, about cultural difference, about the privileged class as the 'other'. It is easy to despise Breeden, and to entertain the conviction that we would always be productive citizens even if we didn't have to be. But why is it that privilege is so often squandered? It would be hard to redeem Spicer, and he does not deserve it, but it may be constructive to try to understand him.

Act 1 (Avowal)
Act 2 (Crash)
Act 3 (Seclusion)
Act 4 (Accusal)
Act 5 (Death)