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The Arts

Posing, Speaking, Revealing

By Holland Cotter

“How does it feel,” Bob Dylan wanted to know in the 1960’s, “to be without a home, like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone?” His taunting question to a prideful high-flyer brought low became a moralizing anthem for an era. Recently two contemporary artists posed the question again, but to very different rolling stones of a new generation, in “Endurance,” a potent multimedia art piece installed at Aljira, the contemporary art center here.

The artists are Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry, a Brooklyn-based youngish couple who have, in a fairly short time, established a solid track record in community-based art. In making “Endurance” they worked with an advocacy organization for homeless youths in Seattle called Peace for the Streets by Kids From the Streets. Through it, they hooked up with two dozen men and women, most white, in their teens, or 20’s, who became their collaborators.

Most of them were from broken or abusive homes. They lived as squatters, crashed with strangers and friends, or moved around the city carrying with them whatever they owned. Some panhandled for a living; others sold drugs; a few had regular jobs. Several were active addicts or trying to break a habit. The common experience of homelessness bound them into a loose community, one that grew tight whenever a member died of an overdose or by violence.

The project, as Mr. McCallum and Ms. Tarry conceived it, was straightforward. They asked each of their collaborators to do the three things: pose for a portrait photograph, record an autobiographical statement and perform alone in an hour-long video.

The format for all the videos was the same: each person stood for a full hour – occasionally changing positions for having a cigarette – on a Seattle street corner, facing a video camera positioned across the street. At the end of the hour, another person would take the place of the first, in a relay that continued for roughly 24 hours, from dawn one day in August 2002 to dawn the next day.

Along with the demands on stamina and concentration, standing in place was, technically, an act of civil disobedience. Seattle has civility laws that make standing or sitting motionless for extended periods a crime. But all the participants made it in the collective performance, which many approached as a vigil in the memory of dead friends.

The portrait photographs are what grab you eye first at Aljira, because of their size and because of the exotic appearance of their subjects. A few are dressed in sweatshirts and jeans, but most go in for intensively customized punk-grunge-hip-hop ensembles, very “Look at me.” By themselves, though, the pictures are of limited interest. They’re basically just snapshots, and besides, looking outlandish isn’t what it used to be. Suburban kids slumming in the city on a Saturday dress this way.

The video is what makes “Endurance” memorable, takes it beyond alternative-lifestyle anthropology. With simple fast-forwarding, Mr. McCallum and Ms. Tarry have shortened the 24-hour film to two hours, and the one-hour standing stints to five minute segments. The segments are accompanied by the recorded autobiographies; the subjects tell how and why they got where they are, and how they feel about it.

They speak, often revealingly, about families, truncated childhoods and complicated love, about plans to change their lives, and their equally determined plans not to change. And as they’re talking, you see them on the screen, holding their places as life whizzes around them as day turns to dusk, dusk to night. At first they look awkward and unromantically vulnerable, then substantial and resilient, then admirable – valorous even.

The most stirring moments come when one person’s hour ends in the video and another’s begins. The frenetic pace of the film slows as a new person enters with measured steps from the side and lines up face forward behind the person already there: a bulky man behind a slight woman, a short man behind a tall one. Each arrival gently lays a hand on the shoulder of the one already there, and at that moment, the film almost stops, as if holding its breath. Then the front performer, responding to the touch, turns and slowly walks out of the picture.

Only after you watch this passing of energy a few times do you start to figure out what you’re really seeing: a ritual dance, a morality play and a mortality play. The story is primal. It’s about being singular and at home in the world at the same time, and how difficult, but possible, that is. The homeless people in “Endurance” are living the story. The collaboration with Mr. McCallum and Ms. Tarry gives them a chance to perform it – that’s the art part, the distancing and clarifying part – and lets us participate as witnesses.

A smaller version of “Endurance” appeared at Marvelli Gallery in Manhattan last season. But Aljira is a great place to experience it, both because the main street of a once prosperous, now struggling city is right there outside the door, and because there’s another exhibition in Aljira’s second gallery, a big, vigorous group show produced by the art center’s Youth Curators Program.

All the work in the show is by juniors and seniors from three Newark public high schools; and the curators who selected and installed it are students too, working under the guidance of Aljira’s program director, Eathon G. Hall Jr. The art is inventive, personal and aware of the world; the student-curators have arranged it adroitly by theme. And that’s all I’ll say, except to note that one of the themes is love; another is danger; another is home.

