

Spooky Action at a Distance

Nic Wilson on *Eternal Wish Radio* by Simon Fuh and Kenneth Jefferey Kwan Kit Lau

In the 1993 film *We're Back!* a time traveling philanthropist and inventor named Captain Neweyes constructs a radio that captures the wishes of people across time. This magical creation manifests these wishes as video bubbles that drift from a plum brown Art Deco radio. Out of the cacophony of wishes picked up by the radio, Neweyes determines that the most ubiquitous wish amongst the children of the 1990s was to see a real, live dinosaur. To that end, he abducts five dinosaurs, feeds them a high-tech cereal that imbues them with the consciousness and inhibitions of humans, and sets them free in Manhattan. If only desire were that simple!

This example, pulled from one of my favourite childhood films, doesn't do a great job of addressing the complicated trajectories of desire but it does lay out the familiar, expected equation: seeing a watermelon creates or draws attention to a preexisting desire for a watermelon which is then satiated by the arrival of a watermelon. I remember hearing the British artist Mark Leckey say in an interview that nothing ever feels as real to him as when it was in his Amazon basket and that there was always a moment of melancholy when the object materialized. Leckey's experience is far closer to my own. I like the spot where desire hangs at the precipice of possibility, hovering above the abyss of the real.

Like Captain Neweyes, Simon and Ken have made a machine for wishing which bubbles and churns, but unlike the wish radio, *Eternal Wish Radio* is not made for wish fulfillment. The images inscribed on the gallery wall are not a Christmas list but instead point to the troubled entanglement between images and desires; making a wish; and the terror of one's dreams coming true.

Throwing a coin into a fountain and making a wish comes from a long history of offering and prayer. Centuries ago, the miraculousness of clean, drinkable water was enough to inspire both devotion and ceremonial offerings. Ancient Germanic and Norse wells used to be adorned with statues and offerings to the gods that lived within them and now depositing coins into a well is seen as public health hazard. This is probably for the best—maybe dreaming shouldn't feel like plugging the meter.

From these humble beginnings, fountains became spectacles of wealth for royalty, centerpieces of public space, and memorials for the dead. One of the world's largest fountains sits outside the Bellagio Casino in Las Vegas. This curious construction could not be a more conspicuous monument to wealth and the dream thereof but has little to do with publicness other than being a site of spectacle. *Eternal Wish Radio* retains some of the functions of more ancient wells, but shies away from the monumental, the spectacular, and the overtly public.

The artist Seth Price notes that "collective experience is now based on simultaneous private experiences, distributed across the field of media culture [...] publicness today has as much to do with sites of production and reproduction as it does with any supposed physical commons."¹ Unlike the fountains at the Bellagio or the Trevi fountain in Rome, the fountains in *Eternal Wish Radio* is not built to last for centuries as a point of public congregation or pilgrimage. It is an improvised assemblage made specifically for wishing, constructed out of found materials like

¹ Seth Price. *Dispersion*. Artist's Publication. 2002.

plastic mixing bowls and garden fountains. This is a personal fountain, made on a domestic scale—a translation of a public ritual for a more multiple and simultaneous type of dreaming.

Similarly, the wishes that dot the walls of the gallery come from a new place of publicness. Some of the images are moments of suspension (jumping, flying, bouncing) that become acts of levitation when they are captured and fixed as images. They are reproduced from an archive; a synthesis of Instagram posts, Wikipedia entries, memes, and what Hito Steyerl has called “the poor image.” Steyerl says that this class of image, with its ubiquity, low resolution, and seemingly authoress origins “transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction.”² Part of the attraction of these images is that they seem to have appeared from nowhere, like a gift from the gods, or a handsome stranger on the bus. Their allure is in their impossibility, and the circumstances of their selection have more to do with courtship than with scholarship.

For Simon and Ken’s wish machine, the visualizations are summoned through drawing. This collection of strange dreams is scratched onto the wall of the gallery in the noble tradition of neolithic cave paintings, Roman frescos, and American bathroom graffiti (for a good time, call _____). The act of drawing stands in for a lot of things. In the past it has been considered a private, preliminary activity carried out in the studio for the artist alone and maybe their patrons. Its primacy, solitude, and immediacy have always made it akin to masturbating in my mind. In this instance, I think Simon and Ken are using it like a sacrament, a way of taking images into your body to be metabolized and then externalized through the hand. It is both a symbolic and literal way of ingesting an image, connecting the light in your eyes with the longing that live behind them, in the darker places of one’s heart.

I don’t think that people fall in love solely because of how they feel about the other person or persons—you also fall in love with the self your lover reflects back to you, because of how they make you feel worthy, attractive, or simply capable of love. In a similar way, one might become enamored with an image because of what it allows you to believe about yourself.

Some of these wishes are worn with pride, a beacon for dreamers of a similar kind, and others may be cloaked in ulterior motives or shameful desires, wither taboo or just embarrassing. In Norse mythology, Freyja is the goddess associated with love and gold who is also noted for her ability to look into and shape the future. One image that seems to echo this combination of time and gold is of an off-brand video gambling machine called “Wheel of Future” which points to the fact that under Capitalism, the future is always synonymous with fortune—turning all dreamers into speculative treasure hunters.

After an artist interview, I wrote down the phrase “spooky action at a distance” on a piece of paper. In that moment it was a line from a poem by Nick Laird called “Feel Free” and not the description of entangled particles that it turned out to be. Einstein coined the term to describe the way that two particles who had undergone quantum entanglement could be separated by great distances and still affect each other when observed. In Laird’s poetic context the phrase analogizes coincidence, affect, and the way that desire sticks unlikely things together. Something spooky happens between the dreamer, the fountain, and the wish: some images seem to have the power to imbed themselves in us in ways that we cannot totally account for.

² Hito Steyerl, *In Defense of the Poor Image* www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/ (November 2009).