

If you close your eyes
you might hear us anyway

New collaborative work by Renee Bevan and Caryline Boreham

With special thanks to

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Bring a halibut!

By Tessa Laird

Twins are a key component of mythological thinking in many cultures. In some instances they are embraced as auspicious and divine, while in others, this naturally unnatural bifurcation leads to all kinds of perturbation. Identical twins confound ideas of individuality; born from a split zygote, their doubling is uncanny, while fraternal twins inspire tales of duality – male versus female, good versus evil. Born from separate eggs fertilized by separate sperm, the physical differences of fraternal twins belie the extreme intimacy of their origins.

There are Hero Twins in many cultural traditions – Castor and Pollux in Greece, Hunahpú and Xbalanqué for the ancient Mayans. Dichotomous beings of good or evil are modeled by Ahura Mazda and Ahriman in Persia, or Izanagi and Izanami in Japan. The Nummo of the Dogon of Mali are indivisible twins – together they make a whole, while in Samoa, Taema and Tilafaiga are Siamese twins who are the goddesses of tatau and war.

Neither Caryline Boreham or Renee Bevan are twins, and they are unrelated to each other. Nevertheless, through a process of artistic collaboration, they attempt a fundamental fusion, creating a range of works that bespeak a desire for connection and communication. Their interest is in the moment *before* the cleavage of twins into two separate individuals; when two are still fused into a single entity. A rare condition called Chimerism exists when a singleton (solo in the womb) was developmentally a twin, but the twin's characteristics, including separate DNA, have remained within the one body. Chimerism is named for the fabled monsters of Greek myth, where a Chimera described a single being composed of multiple creatures.

Collaborations are becoming more commonplace in the artworld, including couples such as Gilbert and George, brothers like Jake and Dinos Chapman, or even twins like Jane and Louise Wilson. Alternative theologian Christopher Bamford has written that “in order to ‘create,’

One must become Two – it must look at itself. It must divide. The unique, irreducible, indivisible cause-source One must become Two. This cut or scission is the mystery of polarization or separation. It reveals that the One must contain its own opposition: the capacity to resist itself. With the self-gaze of the One, is born the process of unity's becoming multiplicity. With the primal self-gaze, difference, relationship, and specification begin."¹

Yet Bevan and Boreham would divest themselves of difference and specification altogether in order to merge – for they are not “one becoming two” but two trying to become one. The video work *Chimera* is just this, an impossible attempt to side-step DNA and attempt to merge bodies by sheer force and willpower. It is as if the artists have exchanged belief in biology for blind faith in physics – for the theories which tell us there is more space between subatomic particles than there is solid matter in the universe.

But the fact is, we don't slide into and through each other like poltergeists walking through walls. Rather, we butt up against each other, sometimes violently, like Alica Frankovich's *Bisons*, an ongoing series of performance works in which contestants lock shoulders in a tackle. But Frankovich's work is about the human/ animal instinct of dominance, hence the title, while *Chimera* enacts an altogether different body lock: the black-clad twosome of Bevan and Boreham engenders some new kind of eight-limbed creature – perhaps an awkward spider, or an unusually angular cephalopod.

Another collaborating, colliding couple springs to mind: Marina Abramovic and Ulay, who pushed their bodies to the point of exhaustion in various explorations of trust, endurance, intimacy and interdependence. Their first performance together was *Relation in Space* (1976), in which the two naked artists ran toward each other from opposite sides of the room, often impacting so brutally that Abramovic was thrown to the floor. This lasted for almost an hour. *Relation in Time* (1977) was much gentler, but more harrowing in terms of endurance; this time the two artists sat back to back for 17 uninterrupted hours, joined by their hair, which coiled like a DNA double helix. Perhaps the fact that the two artists shared a birthday

egged them on to behave like twins? In *Breathing In/ Breathing Out* (1977) the two artists plugged their noses with cigarette filters and clamped their mouths together, exchanging “breath” (carbon dioxide) until they passed out after 19 minutes. *Breathing In/ Breathing Out* may have been an elegiac enactment of the suffocating potential of love relationships, but it also, along with *Relation in Time*, speaks to a connection so fundamental as to have developed *in utero*.

Bevan and Boreham mingle their breath in a more prosaic fashion, without the drama of suffocation or collapse. Each has exhaled into the same jar, so that their breath achieves merger in a way that their belligerent bodies can't. It is not the jar that is presented here, but its photographic portrait, even named as such – an oddly formal rendering of something so quotidian. *Portrait* shares something with Marcel Duchamp's *Air de Paris* (1919), in which the artist ‘bottled’ Parisian air to be taken to New York as a souvenir for a friend. *Portrait* is not a beautiful blown-glass ampoule like *Air de Paris*, although they are both readymades, albeit from different eras. *Air de Paris* looks like an extravagant Christmas bauble, while *Portrait* is merely a humble jar with a screwtop lid. The excessively ordinary visual language of *Portrait* hides its grandiose intent – that it is in fact a record of an etheric Chimera. As the exhibition title suggests, concentration is required to understand all the messages encoded in these seemingly simple works.

8minutes20seconds is another kind of portrait, despite its landscape format, and seeming lack of subject matter. 8 minutes 20 seconds is the time it takes for sunlight to hit the earth, and this ‘portrait’ of sunshine encapsulates this journey through space, by exposing exactly 8 minutes 20 seconds of sunlight onto photographic paper. Perhaps this is a kind of telepathy? After all, what is light but information in its purest form, a message sent in waves from one place to another? Indeed, light is the *ur* message, which makes all other messages possible. And yet, ironically, here light is portrayed by its opposite twin, darkness. The indexical trace of the bright sun is its inverse – a black shadow.

Tracing messages via lapses in time and space is a recurring theme for Bevan and Boreham. Telepathy is proffered as an alternative means for fusion –if you can't merge bodies, you can at least (attempt to) meld minds. *Send/ Receive* is a two-channel video work which opposes

the faces of Bevan and Boreham as they send telepathic messages to each other. This is a process they have earnestly undertaken in order to collaborate artistically, each consciously sending their thoughts to the other, while also becoming a human antenna, ready to receive suggestions in return. This state of heightened awareness allows both artists to be unusually open to artistic ideas that may be floating ‘in the ether,’ bypassing the usual processes of self-doubt and self-critique.

Caught between the two artists’ penetrating stares, viewers might feel a build-up of psychic pressure. Unlike the empathic gaze of Abramovic’s recent solo work *The Artist is Present* (2010), which moved viewer participants to tears, *Send/ Receive*’s telepathic force is urgent and palpable, though without the sinister explosive potential of David Cronenberg’s *Scanners*.² Neither does it have the goofy comic aspect of *The Men Who Stare at Goats*, a more recent filmic portrayal of psychic powers being co-opted by the military.³ But *Send/ Receive* does take us back to the heady pseudo-science of the 1970s, when Yuri Geller was bending spoons on TV, and books like *Psychic Discoveries behind the Iron Curtain* and *The Secret Life of Plants* were bestsellers.⁴

Bevan and Boreham have their own evidence that telepathy works – they have artworks to prove it. *Telepathic work #1 (after Martin Creed)* is based on one of the messages Bevan sent to Boreham, or was it Boreham who sent it to Bevan? Either way, Boreham’s message was interpreted by Bevan, or Bevan’s message by Boreham, as an instruction to make a light installation from various lamps connected to timers which automatically flick on and off at different times. Again, the passage of light can be seen to be emblematic of communication, as with *8minutes20seconds*. Electricity is another energetic flow – one that can even be produced by humans. Jeffrey Sconce’s illuminating book *Haunted Media* (2000) charts the flourishing of spiritualism that accompanied the introduction of electricity into ordinary households, noting that for many electricity was “a mystical and even divine substance that animated body and soul,” while the new telegraph lines not only carried messages between cities and continents, but for some even appeared to “carry the animating ‘spark’ of consciousness itself beyond the confines of the physical body.”⁵

Sconce’s book is an exhaustive collation of spiritualism and wacky pseudo-science brought about via the hopeful applications of new electronic media, including those of Latvian philosopher and psychologist, Dr. Konstantin Raudive, who published the book *Break Through: Electronic Communication with the Dead May Be Possible* (1971). Raudive’s technique came to be known as EVP – Electronic Voice Phenomena – that is, voices which are recorded inadvertently, psychoacoustic ambiguities which emerge out of static, or highly amplified recordings of seemingly quiet interiors. According to Sconce, Raudive made converts to his process even though the speeches found in his recordings were highly surreal:

*“Jetzt-jetzt vilka! Ich will gaisa, says a spirit in a mix of German and Latvian, translating in English to “Now, now she-wolf! I want air.” “Pistole musu cilveks” (Pistol is your man), offers another. Finally, a spirit advises inexplicably, “Atnes Heilbuti!” (Bring a halibut!)”*⁶

Bevan and Boreham’s interest in sound is in the obscure pseudoscientific branch of Archaeoacoustics. Not the more contemporary branch of archaeology which investigates the integration of acoustics into ancient architecture and ritual, but the branch which, after a 1969 *New Scientist* column, claimed that, in the same way that a stylus could release the sounds trapped in the grooves of a record, so ancient pottery could be ‘played’ in order to recover sounds inadvertently (or otherwise) embedded at the time of its creation. While technically possible, as yet no actual recordings have been unearthed from antiquity, although hope springs eternal.⁷ *Archaeoacoustic Experiment* speaks to those desires; although it is merely a collection of mute ceramic cones striated with grooves, they come complete with a speculative transcript by the author Craig Folz, which, in the manner of Raudive’s EVP ghosts, is full of surreal non-sequiturs.

Folz’s literary *meanders* (winding pathways named for a Greek river as well as the term for a Greek decorative frieze) loops and circles back on itself like a broken record heading regressively into the past – from Plato’s cave to the Pleistocene, or indeed any time “before USB sticks and classic rock.” Folz enjoins us to listen hard despite lack of evidence for the validity of messages from the past because “if you close eyes

you might hear us anyway.”

Bevan and Boreham have claimed this line of Folz’s as their title since it knits together the various themes of contact and communication that pervade the exhibition, in which even the most hardened sceptic is asked to suspend disbelief. In *Archaeoacoustic Experiment, 8minutes20 seconds* and *Send/Receive*, the messages take some time to travel. They are echoes of sorts (and echo is another Greek word from another ancient myth). It may take minutes, or millennia, but the contact occurs. It just requires patience. And, if we are to believe one of Raudive’s spirits, a halibut doesn’t go amiss, either.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Christopher Bamford, “Quilting Green Hermeticism: A Tissue of Texts and Tracings,” in *Green Hermeticism: Alchemy and Ecology*, edited by Bamford and Peter Lamborn Wilson, Lindisfarm Books, 2007.
- 2 David Cronenberg’s *Scanners* (1981) subtitled “Their Thoughts can Kill,” was a science fiction horror film in which certain humans are endowed with devastating telepathic and telekinetic powers – in one scene a ‘Scanner’ does psychic battle with another and causes his rival’s head to explode!
- 3 Grant Heslov, *The Men Who Stare at Goats*, (2009) was a star-studded comedy built around a quirky and intriguing concept, which was nonetheless rather forgettable.
- 4 *Psychic Discoveries behind the Iron Curtain* (1970) was written by Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder, and asked “Have the Soviets Found the Secret of Mind over Matter?” *The Secret Life of Plants* (1971) was written by Christopher Bird and Peter Tomkins and suggested that plants have feelings and are capable of telepathy with each other and with humans.
- 5 Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media*, p 7
- 6 Ibid, 88. Sconce compares these bizarre transcripts with the monologues of Samuel Beckett, for example the forlorn narrator of *The Unnamable*, a novel which ends with “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” Sconce notes the similarity with Raudives spirit voices, who call out “Here is night brothers, here the birds burn. Kostja, you are far away.” “We suffer,” says a forlorn spirit, while another adds ominously, “Ah, there are penalties here.”
- 7 Another example of retrofitting technology onto the past: Victoria Finlay, in her study of ancient pigments and dyes, indulges in a bit of Aztec steampunk fantasy while discussing the Mexican caracola or sea snail, milked for its purple dye. “The dye is a naturally light-sensitive compound – the purple appears in reaction to the sunshine, otherwise it stays green. It is curious to think that this natural chemical compound could, if anybody had ever found a way of fixing it, have been used to make the world’s first photographs. We could have inherited ancient photo-images of Aztec rituals or thousand-year-old baby pictures, all held in crazy hallucinogenic colour contrasts with this organic dye. (*Colour: Travels through the Paint Box*, 424)



Telepathic work #1 (After Martin Creed) | Floor Installation | 2014









Portrait | Framed photographic inkjet print (800mmx560mm) | 2014



Before extinguishing fire, we capture silhouettes to remit the dimensions of a cave. In front of you something carved, something engraved. Incidental research suggests this vessel will only divulge her secrets under certain conditions. Condition 1: Mysterious beeps and clicks are detected from the depths of the ocean, but they are not foreboding enough to keep our silky protagonists on dry land. Their dismissal of the pleistocene age makes no sense until one considers the sexy tug of molluscan fauna. Condition 2: Know this. There will always be patriots for our bulky arrangement of florets. There will always be those who endeavour to extract meaning from the loosest compendium. But despite their best efforts, there can be no narrative without an endless parade of loops in which the needle can run around. Meteorologists reach the same conclusion. What's the use of summer rain without the scent of soggy cardboard? Condition 3: Is it inappropriate to imagine touching strangers through their clothes? Man with beard, woman with stone beads. Is it trespassing to eavesdrop on the sounds from previous generations? For contemporary peoples, segmentation is the featured content. Condition 4: In this one, the past is so distant as to preclude the invention of mountains and any associated plateaus. A lovely aspect composed of flat, monochromatic fields of light. Spectral analysis shall reveal the paths of arrows, while trippy diagrams of valve locations shall reveal the dissonance in our names. Condition 5: Those who commute to work are the same as those who would remark on dreary conditions. One says, "How can we confide in flesh without the removal of bones and cartilage?" Another says, "Can you hear me? Are you there? Over and out." Condition 6: The people who build the road intuit our future travel by placing their fingertips on the ground and checking for small vibrations. They mulch their hands through the soil, homing in on nematodes and other reminders of the last glacial period. Condition 7: Arch. Arched. Arching. Condition 8: During the descent we instinctively brace for impact, but impact is a quaint concept from an era we have yet to document. If anyone asks. We're talking about the time before USB sticks and classic rock. We're talking about the time before fishes could bleed. Actually, we're not talking at all, but if you close your eyes you might hear us anyway.

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