

Wednesday, July 18, 2007

In Bed Together

Connecticut's contemporary art galleries join forces to present an intimate look inside our hotel rooms.

As someone who spends a lot of time traveling, Chris Doyle readily admits to having a “weird love-hate relationship” with hotels. Whereas he once romanticized them as sanctuaries, the more time he spent in hotel rooms, the more he began to resent the time suck they represented. “When you spend a lot of time away, you find you waste a lot of time in hotels, so making my work in hotels made sense,” he says.

Doyle, a Brooklyn-based artist with a Harvard degree in architecture, started using hotel rooms as his studio, making stop-animation videos of hotel beds. (His video *Sheets*, the rummages of an unmade bed that verges on poignant, is on display in the lobby of the Hotel on Rivington on Manhattan's Lower East Side.) But like any truly inquisitive person, Doyle's curiosity begged to go exploring beyond the confines of his own borrowed room. “When you walk down a hotel corridor, wouldn't you like to throw open the doors and see what they're doing in there?”

That compelling question was the artistic impetus behind “50,000 Beds,” an ambitious project that turns 45 video artists loose in different hotel rooms across Connecticut. Well beyond its suggestive title, “50,000 Beds” certainly has a voyeuristic appeal. (50K is Doyle's best guess as to the approximate number of hotel rooms in the state, with some artistic license thrown in—49,500 beds just doesn't have the same punch.) Doyle saw the hotel room as a perfect platform to provide a creative structure—it's familiar, yet it's not home; it's an intimate setting, yet it's also anonymous. Because of these qualities, it invites a narrative to develop without dictating what course that story might take. Anything can happen in a hotel room, as the work selected for inclusion in the project attests. Doyle says he gave the artists a simple assignment, which was by no means easy to pull off: During a single night's stay, make a short video inside the room of a hotel, motel or inn in Connecticut. “Close your door, and do what you can in there,” is in essence what he told them.

The doors get thrown open to reveal videos that are stunningly idiosyncratic, running from 90 seconds to 23 min-

utes, with hardly a redundant theme. In one room, a man makes love to his wife under the nefarious auspices of a surveillance camera. In another, Greenwich hedge fund captains play a high-stakes poker game, in an homage to Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. Meanwhile, revolutions are being hatched in various rooms across the state for reasons ranging from U.S. intervention in Latin America to frustration over the meaningless babble of the information age.

“I committed to using whatever I got, which could have been more difficult than it was, because I got a lot of great work,” says Doyle, who attests to feeling anxious about the open-endedness of the project. Yet his initial anxiety yielded to excitement as the work started pouring in.

“The roots for this kind of project are in the roots of social sculpture,” adds Doyle, whose résumé includes such public art. “The idea of setting these kinds of social projects in motion isn't a new idea.”

However, what is unique and, in fact, groundbreaking about “50,000 Beds” is its genesis as a first-ever collaboration between Connecticut's three contemporary art institutions. The setting for the birthing of such a revolutionary concept,



alas, wasn't a hotel room, but rather the offices of Artspace, New Haven's volunteer- and artist-driven venue that, for the past decade has organized one of the largest annual city-wide open studios in the nation. If it had been filmed, the scene would have unfolded something like this:

A New York Times arts critic exits the main gallery after making a few final notes in his reporter's notebook, then stops into the administrative office to chat with executive director Helen Kauder.

Times Scribe: "Hey, have you ever talked to those guys at Real Art Ways in Hartford or the Aldrich in Ridgefield about doing something together? It seems like your missions are very similar, and it would make my job a helluva lot easier."

Kauder: "Gee, not really."

After the reporter leaves, the executive director sits down at her desk, and after leafing through her Rolodex, makes a phone call.

Kauder: "Richard [Klein, director of exhibitions at the Aldrich], would you be interested in meeting me and Will [K. Wilkins, director of Real Art Ways] for lunch?"

The above scenario is roughly how Helen Kauder describes the notion to work together came about, but she adds, the precise mechanism for collaborating "didn't come to us right away." Fortunately, the desire to jointly commission and implement an exhibition was compelling enough that they stuck with the process until they hit upon a framework that would work.

Cooperation between contemporary art venues isn't entirely unprecedented. In 2004, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, and the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles came together as the "Three M Project," with a commitment to commission, exhibit and acquire new works from emerging artists. However, mounting a co-curated show that travels from one city to the next was more an exercise in economies of scale than an effort to co-create an event that takes place simultaneously at three venues, which is what "50,000 Beds" will do.

The work of 15 different video artists will be displayed at each of the Connecticut venues, and opening receptions will be staggered over a weekend, with Artspace hosting its opening on Friday, July 20; Real Art Ways debuting its selection on Saturday, July 21; and the Aldrich installations going live on Sunday. The idea, of course, is to get constituents of the arts to travel from one venue to the next in order to fully appreciate the project as a conceptual whole.

The directors of the three Connecticut art venues all closely follow the Creative Capital Foundation, an organization that funds artists whose work is provocative and noncommercial, says Kauder, which is how they found Chris Doyle. "It's an honor to get a grant from them. We thought that those artists would have a proven record, but wouldn't be such stars they'd still have time for us," she explains.

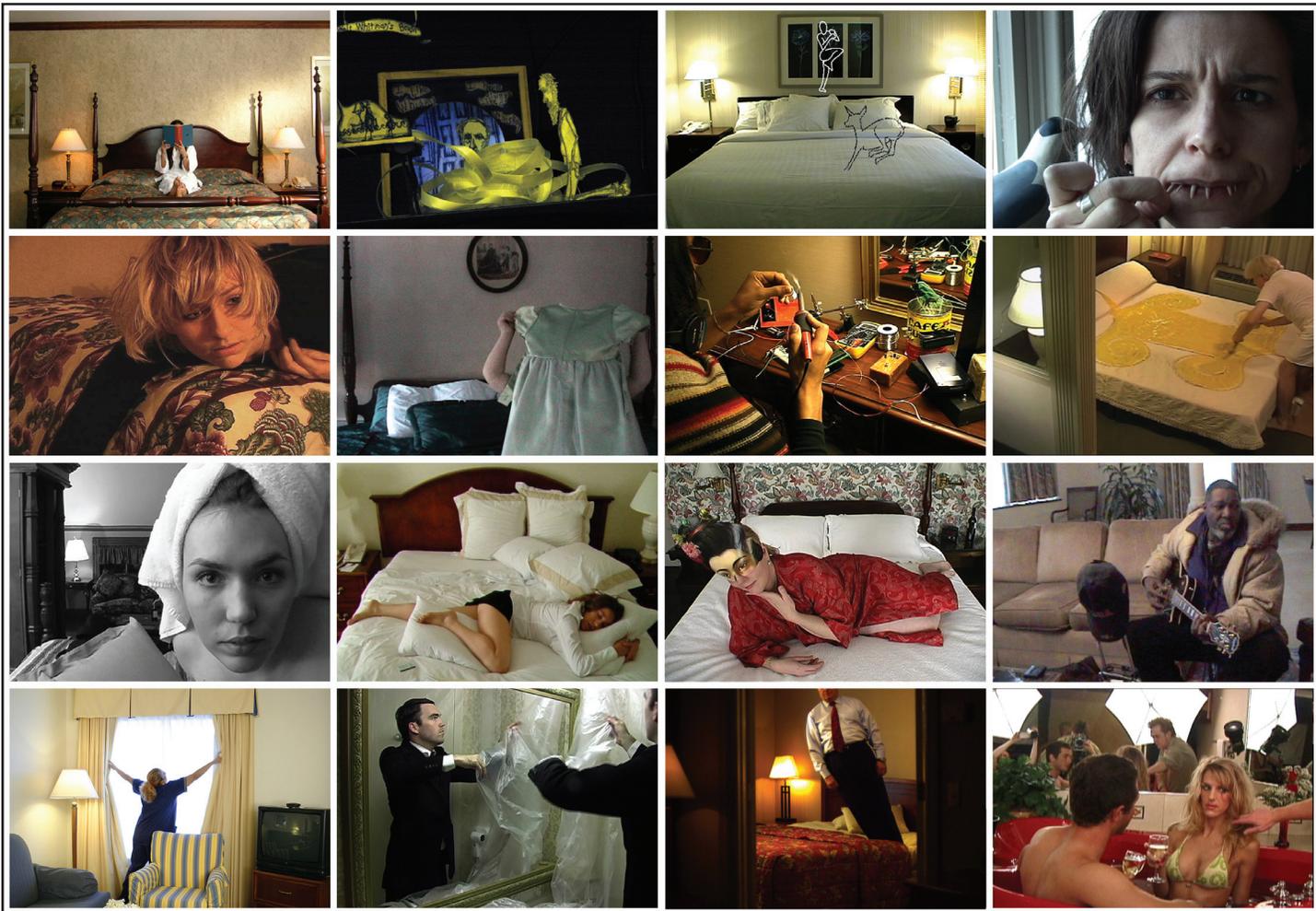
The directors invited five artists to submit proposals, and Doyle's was the one they chose because "it got to this issue of culture and tourism being at odds with each other," Kauder adds.

With the recent merger of Connecticut's arts and tourism councils, many in the arts community were concerned that it would mean less funding for the arts. When asked whether their fears had been realized, Kauder answers rather diplomatically: "It's an issue of trying to do more with less. We're pleased that the merged agency is trying to look for synergies."

That merged entity, the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism, awarded a \$90,000 grant to the collaborators for "50,000 Beds"—which may be why Kauder is not eager to bite the hand that, in large part, funded the project. Doyle noted, however, that the project received all the grants it applied for—a first in his experience—including funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the LEF Foundation and the Furthermore program of the J.M. Kaplan Fund. But it was that princely sum from the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism that grabbed the attention of the blog hotelchatter.com, which openly wondered, "Could this be the sneakiest, and perhaps cleverest, tourist campaign ever?"

Indeed, as the blog noted, the "50,000 Beds" website, 50000beds.net, does provide a full listing (as well as links) of all the participating hotels, motels and inns that donated rooms for the project, and a travel itinerary for how to get to each art venue, as well as where one might get a bite to eat. However, Doyle says he "kept a firewall" of anonymity regarding where things were shot. The hotels "were eager to participate, but I made it clear it wasn't promotion for them. I didn't want to censor anyone. I had no idea what people were going to do in those rooms."

The project challenged Doyle to explore the "tension between creating a platform for other artists, while still having some authorship" of the finished whole. This "new ground," as Doyle calls it, is what creators of video games, which employ the work of multiple designers, have been exploring as well. "Each of the videos is like a building, and the project is like a city," Doyle, the former architecture student, posits. "I've planned the city."



Indeed, Doyle has created the context for the way audiences will absorb the work. The video installations are tailored to the specific venues. At Real Art Ways and the Aldrich, Doyle has built bi-level platforms with nooks and spaces that allow the participant to simultaneously view the project as an individual or group experience. At Artspace, the work will all be on one level, but Doyle will achieve a similar effect by using scrims and transparent screens. Some of the videos will be projected onto large screens, while others will play on TV sets or computer monitors, all according to Doyle's sensibilities about how best to deliver the content. The overall impact might be similar in feel to what Hitchcock achieved in *Rear Window*, the 1954 thriller in which Jimmy Stewart plays a wheelchair-bound photographer who peers through his camera lens to spy on his neighbors through their apartment windows and becomes convinced that one of them has committed murder. In a similar manner, Doyle's layout puts the voyeur in a position of having to decide what to do next with information they've surreptitiously gleaned from watching these videos.

Outside of his curatorial tasks, Doyle says his chief interest in the project was exploring the nature of collaboration itself. "The key is everyone working toward the same goal and that they have complementary skills," he says.

Real Art Ways' Wilkins says he gained a "deepened respect" for his peers and the staffs of Artspace and the Aldrich. "A spirit of generosity infused this whole process," he says. "And that started with Chris Doyle."

The collaborative process brought Connecticut's three leading contemporary art venues closer than perhaps anyone anticipated. For one thing, the physical distance between the venues seemed less of an impediment to working together. But more than that, the key players got to know and trust each other while working on the project. That trust led to Kauder's decision to leave the executive director post at Artspace to join the Aldrich as its deputy director, a position she steps into fully next week. "I don't think it would have happened without '50,000 Beds,'" Kauder says.

For his part, Doyle hopes to expand the project beyond its Connecticut run. Doyle wants to make the project's website a platform for artists around the country who want to contribute videos that use hotel rooms as their setting. "I hope I can make an interesting experience out of the material so that a person's experience of a hotel or motel will be altered," Doyle says. "I know I won't look at a hotel room in the same way again." □