

A Dialogue with Disaster and the works of Christoph Draegger according to Arfus Greenwood

categories: interviews

The other day I was summoned to the Williamsburg studio of the tall, curly headed Swiss artist Christoph Draegger to help him prevent a disaster—tying down an oversized art work to the roof of his car for transport to the gallery. The perversity of the occasion hit us fast and hard; that in order to prevent a disaster, we must first presuppose it. We must presuppose the trauma in order to not experience the trauma. But like any terror-fying/horrific supposition, a small part of our desires wished for the fulfilment of such a disaster.



The art work, itself, tied upon the roof was blank—a pitch black puzzle that has somehow spontaneously ejected pieces to expose the abstracted image of the 1945 Nagasaki Bomb (code named, The Fat Man)—which was on its way to Draegger's third solo show at Roebling Hall.

Undoubtedly, I had to ask.

AG: So what constitutes a disaster?

CD: Although today my hair may be considered a disaster, I think, literally, a disaster is the result of a natural or human-made hazard that causes death and devastation.

AG: But death and devastation surround us, no? I mean, a person may die as a result of cigarette smoking. Why is that not considered a disaster?

CD: Well, I would contend that disasters do surround us. However, it is those disasters which touch us personally that we recognize. More often these are catastrophes that affect a collective conscious. And so although we may not categorize the death of a single smoker as a disaster, we might say that the carcinogens developed out of the Industrial Revolution have caused a human-made disaster.

AG: So a disaster is relative? Cancer, the Bomb, your hair. You mention the Industrial Revolution. Have there always been disasters? Let's say the Great Flood of Genesis for example. Is it a disaster if it is "God-made"? Or how about the Ice Age, where there were not humans as we know them? Or in fact, how about the Big Bang where the cosmos was previously in a state of peace, of pure symmetry?

CD: Wow. First, certainly my hair is never a disaster. I mean, look at it. It is perfect. Perhaps a perfect disaster. But let's rewind. The word disaster—from the Latin, *dis-astros*, meaning "bad star," comes from an astrological idea that when the stars are in a bad position a bad event will happen. So I think that certainly there was a time when natural disasters were attributed to a kind of retribution by the Gods, transitionally as represented by the stars. In this sense, the Great Flood would not be considered a disaster. But with the development of the Natural Sciences beginning with, I think, Pliny the elder in 77 AD, who wrote *Naturalis Historia*, nature itself could be understood as a force without a personified producer. However, today, there are still people who consider something like Katrina as "God-made." So we could categorize disasters as human-made and god-made, interchangeably with human-made and natural.

AG: Really? Wasn't that the lesson of Lisbon when God died, because it was

irreconcilable that God could make a disaster? He is a creationist.

CD: Whose God?

AG: Okay, but then interchangeably, nature is a creationist.

CD: Again that is relative. Let's take the Ice Age as you mentioned. The dinosaurs, or Mesozoic Era creatures, became extinct as a result of this radical climate shift. Now if these creatures possessed a cognitive ability to comprehend the devastation then I might say that this was a disaster, a disaster to a dinosaur. But as the concept of disaster is a human construct, I would have to say that as this climate shift benefited human evolution, it was not a disaster. The same would be true of the Big Bang, where there was not even a witness to the event.

AG: But if a tree falls in the forest...?

CD: ...Does it make a sound? Do you ask me as an artist, or as a man of science?

AG: I ask you as a fellow pervert. Since the definition of a voyeur includes someone who receives enjoyment from witnessing other people's suffering. You have made this a life study. A delicious schadenfreude-ist. After all, beyond the fact that it seems accepted as human nature to slow down to view a car crash, today in our media culture there exists, as they call it, disastertainment. Public television's NOVA seems to concentrate on disasters, hosted by its star with Death by Black Hole's Neil Tyson, or even the almost alien, Steven Hawking. There is even a cable network devoted to it. So, if a disaster really requires a witness, what is the witness' role in a disaster?



CD: Yes, everyday, I look forward to Armageddon cocktail hour which, quite frankly could be at any hour. It's called the "news." We all seem to be in a consummate state of anticipating a greater disaster. The fact that any situation could result in a train wreck gives us all a perverse sense of joy, fear and joy—jouissance. But to the role of the witness of a disaster. Yes! We all prepare ourselves for how we will perform when our fears are realized. There is drama in the truest sense in this.

AG: Just as an aside, the word "catastrophe" originated from the classical tragedies. The catastrophe being the final resolution in a narrative plot, which unravels the intrigue and brings the piece to a close, usually the death of one or more main characters which signified the height of the drama—the height of drama.

CD: Precisely, drama... drama. After all, the reason that a disaster is an abstract concept is that it is myopic, or a Ptolemaic perspective, where the universe revolves around each of us, individually. The real sickness in this is that although we savour the idea of our performance to the subject, we do not or cannot savour being the object of a disaster.

AG: Can't we?

CD: That's very punk of you.

AG: Well, like so many, I am punk as a fashion. I am incapable of making nihilism my internal pogrom. Perhaps because I know that in the end, I would not be able to

witness the effects of my own death. And so although I might desire death, I require the moment when I can say, "Wow, I am dead now. How about that?"

CD: Exactly, this is the role of the witness. Knowing that we cannot witness our own death, we make effort to simulate it, again, and again, and again.

AG: So speaking of fashion, what is the fashion? What forms of disasters are in vogue now? I mean, Pliny actually died in the Vesuvius-Pompeii lava flow. Ironic. Pleasurably, so sick, but pleasurably ironic. But unless we are a poet we do not fear being fully preserved in ash. Today, we are perhaps more romanced by a plane crash, or...

CD: Well, disasters require a certain element of surprise, so I wouldn't be so cynical to say that the media determines the fashion, as you call it, of disaster. Events like Katrina or 9/11 or the Burma Tsunami got good press, but the death toll was not as great as, let's say, the massive flooding of the Yangtze River in China in 1931 that caused more than 3 million deaths from flooding and starvation. This at the beginning of Mao's formation of the Soviet Republic of China little was known in the West. As well, the bulk of China was primarily rural and without fluid communication with the Nation as a whole. Or, take for instance, do you remember anything about the 1990 landslide in western Iran that resulted in 50,000 deaths. Certain regimes or media segments sweep such disasters under the carpet, despite its affect upon the consciousness of the people. But a disaster is! It just is, despite the media—the fashion. A collective conscious is forever changed by such an event. Now as we move into a true global media demographic, the collective conscious has greater impact. So yes! The fashion of anything becomes inseparable from the concept itself. A Hollywood-esque media determines how the global conscious values events. It responds but it determines.

AG: Okay so with this I put forth an impossible construct. Give me the top ten disasters of human history!

CD: The greatest or my favourites?

AG: Which ever you prefer?

CD: Well, the crash of Swiss 111 in 1998 absolutely gripped me. I think I still have ticket stubs that say 111 because I am flying back and forth on this Swiss Air route

so often. Or even like that, the avalanche in Galtür, Austria stays with me. I was just miles away in Switzerland at the time and, because of the devastation, could not get out for a week. We would watch the coverage on the TV and could simultaneously hear the landslide happening around us. I will never forget the stereo sound of it. From another perspective, Pompei is fantastic. Because the landscape sculpted by this event is so beautiful, it is now a tourist destination. The Burma Tsunami has this interesting aspect in a different way. Because it is such a major holiday destination in Sweden, over 400 Swedes died. And so the disaster in Burma is now considered the biggest disaster to hit Sweden. Of course, there is an abundance of paradoxical aspects to disasters, whether they are natural, technological or social.

AG: Why are you smiling?

CD: Oh, I was just thinking of a stupid little thing, but I lost my sunglasses swimming in the Bay of Pigs.

AG: Yikes!

CD: No, no. I got them back.



AG: So I don't wish to be wary, but of course I have to be wary about representation of the subject. Recently there were more fires in California—

California, that has been identified as America's disaster State (despite the Bayou's recent contestation.) It's Governor, Mr. Arnold Schwarzenegger went on the telly in the heat of it saying proudly (in immutable accent), "We've had a civilized evacuation. This is the opposite of Katrina. Here we are in Qualcomm Stadium; you can get a backrub, a yoga lesson or a gourmet sandwich. The kids have Playstation. Everybody's happy." So (and I make a little leap here) you have chosen to represent the Tlatelolco Massacre, the Mexico City student riots of '68. In representation, do you feel a responsibility to respect the dead, after all?

CD: It seems that every culture has a student riot in its history, but so little seemed to be known about the Tlatelolco Massacre that for that reason already it becomes an important reference. Of course, the references that my works may make are just that, references to an historical event. But events like the Holocaust, for instance, sure, I tread lightly. It all depends upon the way in which a disaster inhabits our collective conscious.



AG: With

this new piece at Roebling Hall, *When The Music's Over*, I am reminded of Baudrillard's statement, "What are you doing after the orgy is over?" Your broken, cracked, diffracted, disco ball eroticizes the disaster in the absolute. So okay, that's a statement as a question, but the underlying question or perhaps accusation would be, "Is such cynicism the answer?" I understand the need to avoid sentimentality with the subject but are you not after all promoting a cynical psycho-socio-

conclusion to our role as viewer, as reader, witness?

CD: Is that cynical? We all have a personal relationship with certain disasters, perhaps even the concept of disaster, and so every approach becomes essential. The only questionable behaviour would be to presuppose a disaster. But look we do not need to do it. We all know what is approaching us. There is an increasing threat of non-drinkable water, there's global warming. I keep hearing about meteorites. The list goes on and on.

AG: And on.

After all, Draegger's works were impeccably installed. The patron-audience was impeccably dressed, hot and hip. But I could not erase the moment when our own perversions carried us back to the scene where Draegger's representation of the Fat Man Nagasaki bombing (on the Volvo roof top) might let loose, impale a pedestrian, causing a traffic jam, where cars collide, crash and ignite, setting fire to the buildings around it, where old gas lines are cracking, seeping and explode, from building to building, city to city, the world. The end.



"While humanity was once according to Homer an object of contemplation for the Gods, it has now become a contemplation of itself. Its own alienation has reached such a degree that humanity's own destruction becomes a first rate aesthetic sensation." (Walter Benjamin)

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