

BTR – breakthradio, Art Uncovered: Interview with Phyllis Baldino

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Phyllis Baldino is a video artist based in Brooklyn, New York. In her latest exhibition, Baldino brings together pieces that explore her career-long interest in scientific phenomenon. From the multiple dimensions inhabited by sub-atomic particles, to the end of the world and issues of privacy and technology, Baldino translates big ideas into a visual language that takes the form of single-channel videos and photographs.

Last week I met with Phyllis Baldino at Studio 10 gallery to talk about her exhibition “per future,” the show is on view through February 3rd.

Part 1

My name is Phyllis Baldino. We're at studio 10 here in Bushwick. And I have a solo show up now that's called “Per Future.”

Thomas: Phyllis thanks so much for coming on the show. To start off I was hoping you could tell us a little bit about the title of your show, it's called “per future.”

Phyllis: I was invited to have a show here, which was great. I was looking at my work over the past few years and I was noticing that there was some work that actually had different kinds of futures. So the more I looked the more I saw. And I just decided to combine different pieces that were very different conceptually but actually had this kind of common thread - meaning that each one was kind of different but they were also kind of the same. There is a piece - it's actually a document of a performance that I did in Times Square. I've been having my single channel work distributed through Electronic Arts Intermix, which is EAI, for the short version. In 2011 they had their 40th anniversary, which was really great, and they were invited to have a program in Times Square - in that time frame. So Josh Kline, who's the public programs curator at EAI, created a program for that location and one of my pieces he chose was from 1993, it's called “Suitcase/Not Suitcase.” That particular piece is - I went to a thrift store and I bought this really old suitcase. And I chopped it up off site, not on the video. Then on camera - this is when I lived in Los Angeles, it was in my studio - I had it opened up on the floor. Then I just literally threw all my clothes in it, and closed it and then walked away. And as I walked away the clothes were coming out because there's a hole in the suitcase. So that's basically the piece. It's very simple - kind of a performance but it's not. It's a performance but it's a documentation because I'm just alone in my apartment.

Thomas: So you mentioned this idea of Fuzzy Logic. What is fuzzy logic? How does that relate to your work, what's the tie in?

Phyllis: Fuzzy Logic actually is a real thing. It sounds like it's fake or it sounds like someone just made it up. But it actually is a logic. Back in '93 I was reading a lot about it. There's these amazing books Bart Kosko wrote - I'm forgetting the title but he wrote the book - and Lotfi Zadeh who was out of Berkeley at the time, I'm not sure if he's even still there. They were these amazing books about Logic and my takeaway from it was the idea of what I was saying before, is to have an object be what it is and what it is not simultaneously. So that was my concern in working on the series. That's why it was called “The Gray Area Series”. Each title was the title of the object and then Not. So, “Suitcase/Not Suitcase,” “Clock/Not Clock.” It was very systematic that way. And each shoot was actually done in the first take. So it was about process as well. And I didn't know what I was doing, I just had my camera - this is my first series - so I would literally turn it on, walk in front of the camera, do the process and then walk back and turn the camera off. I didn't even know how to edit so I even did the fade out - press the fade out button on the camera. So it would be included in the editing - that's how basic stupid it was.

Part 2

Thomas: A lot of your pieces, both in this show and seems like in kind of your whole body of work, sort of start with, or are influenced by, some kind of concepts from science or you just mentioned Fuzzy Logic. You have two other pieces in the show from a series called “Out of Focus Everything” - that have sort of an interesting kind of scientific foundation.

Phyllis: There’s actually 40 in that series, it ended up being quite a lot - that’s just what happened I just made 40 (laughs). That was actually inspired by the ‘Theory of Everything’ which is another theory that sounds like it’s made up but it actually is - all these theories that sound fake but they’re actually true - which is kind of funny.

Thomas: So what is the ‘Theory of Everything’?

Phyllis: It’s trying to unify Einstein’s theory of relativity and quantum mechanics - the very big with the very small.

Thomas: I see. This is one of those ideas that’s kind of on the cutting edge of where theoretical physics, and astrophysics, and all these sort of very high-level mathematic understandings of the universe kind of converge.

Phyllis: And so that’s why it’s called the ‘Theory of Everything.’ In a nutshell- they’re just trying to have everything work together. Which may or may not be true. Like who knows? And one of those theories means that we might be actually living in 11 dimensions. But just the idea of 11 dimensions kind of boggles my mind so for me I wanted to try to create that. It’s like wow, 11 dimensions sure I can do that in video why not? (laughs)

Thomas: I see, it’s like translating that idea to something visual.

Phyllis: Right. What would that be? And I really have no idea. So basically - each piece I did was different. And each piece has its own organic process. Some of them are manually manipulated where I would project the image and then I would manipulate the image in the studio- like literally in real time - but I would film the real time manipulation and then other ones are manipulated with editing. So each one’s different.

Thomas: And so they’re these abstract video pieces and they seem like they involve layering and different techniques like that. Some of them look like - am I looking at something from under a microscope? or from inside someone’s body? (both laugh) or some of them are more kind of digital glitchy looking. It’s sort of an interesting kind of mix.

Phyllis: I just went around and I filmed a combination of different things and sources and people. It was very intuitive. For this series I just was shooting really intuitively. And wherever I would go, I just would shoot. And then I would take the footage back to the studio and then manipulate it and then as I was looking at the footage - it would just happen - that I would- oh! I’m going to do this with this footage - it just kind of happened it’s very organic. I had no idea what I was doing.

Thomas: So you’re gathering material from the world, filming it and then bringing it back into your studio and transforming it.

Phyllis: Right, exactly. So it’s not something that I knew what I was doing - I just was kind of doing it.

Part 3

Thomas: So I mean, we’ve talked about parallel universes. How do scientific concepts influence your work?

Phyllis: It just kind of happens. I don't know.

Thomas: Had you always been interested in science?

Phyllis: Not always. Not since I was a kid, no it's not like that. A lot of it is the abstraction of it actually. I really am intrigued with the abstraction of science. Not really science, per se, but physics. I really think that physicists are - they're like artists. They're very devoted to their medium. It's a lot of abstraction in what they're dealing with. It's just really intriguing.

Thomas: They have their own language, kind of, in a sense. In the terms that they use math.

Phyllis: I think that 11 dimensions is - maybe because I'm just so visual more than anything else - that for me it's just more of this - if I hear those words I think of something visual not something mathematical. But that's just me. Whenever I read about these ideas it's just really inspiring and they really are just so - out there. I mean what they're doing at these locations. Like when I went to CERN they were working on the LHC when I was there. And I took a tour.

Thomas: That's the Large Hadron Collider?

Phyllis: Yes. I was there for a week. And I got to stay there in their dorms and walk around and have lunch with physicists. It was like a dream. And they had these huge warehouses where they were actually building the LHC - the components - and they're like big toys. They're bright yellow and blue and red. They're these boys with toys! And it's enormous, enormous! The facility was so big that you can't take a picture, it's like the Grand Canyon. I couldn't take a picture because it was just too big. So it's hard to say exactly. It's like anything - if you have a connection and if you're reading something and the more you read the more you want to read and the more you want to know and the more you want to kind of transform, kind of think more and then make something because you read all that, then that's why.

Thomas: Yes. That parallel between physicists and artists and that abstraction is the thing, sort of the place where they meet - that's really an interesting and cool idea.

Phyllis: So that's the only way I can kind of put it - if I have to use words - that's probably the only way I can kind of say it.

Part 4

Phyllis: I'd like to talk just briefly about the Gordon Matta-Clark piece.

Thomas: This piece is called "Did Gordon Matta-Clark know?"

Phyllis: Question mark (laughs). And we will never know if he knew because he's sadly not with us anymore. But I was visiting my friend Elaine Brodie who owns this amazing house in West Caldwell, New Jersey - and it's the right side of a barn. When I went to go visit her, I was like, what do you mean it's the right side of a barn? Well, around the turn of the century, there was this big barn on this property and they chopped it up into four houses. And they physically moved the houses away from each other. She said, right down there is this other house and the one here and I was like "Oh my god!" I was just floored. It's not too far from the city and it's in New Jersey. And I thought, oh my god, did Gordon Matta-Clark know that this happened? Because this is like his work.

Thomas: And for people that may not know.

Phyllis: Gordon Matta-Clark was this amazing artist that sadly died but he used to physically cut buildings in half. So buildings basically he used as his subject matter. And in New Jersey, I'm forgetting exactly where, because my brain doesn't remember everything unfortunately, he took a Sawzall and he cut a house, literally in half, and there's a film that shows him doing this which is also phenomenal. So the fact that my friend lives and owns the end of a barn in New Jersey; and this barn was cut up into four different sections

at the turn of the century - makes me wonder did Gordon Matta-Clark know that this happened? And did this information influence him in his work, you know, later. So that's what that piece is.

Thomas: Can you describe for us what the piece looks like? Because this isn't a video piece?

Phyllis: No, no this is photography (laughs) Which is, I rarely do photographs. I only do them obviously in cases like this, where that's the only way that I can show this is in photographs. It's actually very simple. I took a picture of Elaine's house on the left and I took a picture of the house down on the street, in the center, and then the house on the right. And the fourth house sadly burnt down in the 20's. They only know this because a man - this is actually kind of a great story - they were sitting outside on their porch and this old man was staring at them for the longest time and they said hello?? Who are you? Turns out when he was a child, an infant, he was with his father going down the stairs in the back stairwell as the house was burning. That was the house that was right next door to Elaine's house. Then Elaine noticed at the very top of her eaves of her house there's still some carbon and some melting because that's how close the house was to her house during that fire. So there were four houses. And then on the very top, the fourth photograph, is a barn - then I just took a Sharpie and divided it in to four sections - and just wrote at the top 'Did Gordon Matta-Clark know?'

Part 5

Thomas: One other piece that I wanted to talk about is a piece called "TraitFee." It's about a 14 minute long video piece in which you sort of see people - just who you're filming surreptitiously- kind of on the fly - walking around New York City and then you see words appearing on their bodies.

Phyllis: I was thinking a lot about privacy issues, which I know is kind of rampant these days and everyone talks about privacy issues. But I was thinking very specifically about private information that isn't really known. I mean privacy is happening on all levels I think in our society and it's just getting worse and worse. Every day I feel like it's just getting worse and worse. So I decided to just jump it. I was thinking a lot about the idea of privacy and that we pay for privacy, even something as basic as a private home phone number. If you want to be unlisted you have to pay the phone company to have your number not be in the phonebook. In that same vein, "TraitFee" is a fee that you pay, it's a specific monetary amount per person, that you pay to have your personal information 'not' appear on your body. So the people in the video have not paid their TraitFee. So you see things like "I will answer a tough question for you for five dollars" I'm just reading off the screen right now. "Pussy Whipped" is another one. "Fakes orgasms" is another one. "Chronic plagiarist" - so all these people have these traits on their bodies.

Thomas: I remember one that was a mail carrier and she's taking mail out of the mailbox and it says "I never say what I really mean." How did you come up with the different things that you wanted to put on these people because a lot of times when we think about these sort of privacy issues we're talking about personal data or phone numbers or Credit Card things or who we're friends with on Facebook or something. But you sort of made a different kind of leap and you're kind of talking about emotional things, or personality things.

Phyllis: Personal. Right. This piece took quite a while. It's a combination of - I literally sat down and started writing phrases of people that I knew over my life. Everyone from relatives to friends to friends of friends. And then online is a treasure trove (laughs) people just blather on about so many things! It's amazing what you can find online. So it's a combination of many sources.

Thomas: So when you say online are you trolling on Facebook?

Phyllis: No!! No, fuck Facebook. Not Facebook, not at all. It ranges. Okay, I'll give you an example. This is one of my favorite examples actually. If you go to an online dictionary source like say Websters, I'm forgetting if it was the Websters, or if it was Oxford I went to - and I started looking up words that were just not very common. The word I looked up was finicky. I always loved that word. So I looked up finicky and at the very bottom of the definition there's this kind of show and tell area where you can just type in -

and the question they ask on the website is, why did you look up this word? and people tell their little stories as to why they looked up this word.

Thomas: Wow.

Phyllis: And there was this woman or girl who knows how old she was? And she said “I looked up this word because my mother is a really finicky possum eater.” And I was like, what’s better than that? So, that’s in the piece. I went to offbeat locations to find these things. A lot of them were places where I wouldn’t know how I got there I just kind of got there somehow - click click click click and then I’m all of a sudden in this place where someone’s talking about something and then I read what they say.

Thomas: It’s a very personal piece, at least for me, when I watched it because it is the kind of thing where you see these regular people, you see these phrases and they’re either things like oh yeah, I felt like that or I know that person.

Phyllis: Right, right.
(both laugh)

Part 6

Thomas: How did you get interested in making video work? Have you always been a video artist?

Phyllis: No, actually my BFA is in sculpture. So I did sculpture for many years. And then I kind of felt a change coming (laughs) that sounds like a strange way of putting it. I lived in a big loft on Skid Row at 4th and Wall in LA. I had to get a roommate for one month because one of my roommates left. This guy Louie came for one month. He said he was working at Macy’s and had all these Sony Handycams actually that he was selling and he just gave me one. For free. Which was back then - I could never afford a video camera, this was 1993, it was worth about 800 bucks. At first I said no because it was just creepy. But then he kept on saying he wanted me to have it, then I finally just said okay, I’ll take it. And that’s the intervention that happened. Then I started doing video and it was really great. Because it really was, that was the next step because I did feel something coming and that was the next thing. It just feels really natural to work in video.

Thomas: I mean for the most part, the videos that you are doing all seem to be towards the more - I don’t know if low-fi is the right word but - these aren’t slick glossy things that you’re shooting with an HD camera. In the show you’ve got one video that you said you shot with the tiny little...

Phyllis: The little Harinezumi, yeah.

Thomas: Yes, that little cheap Japanese camera. Do you look at early video art? A lot of the more experimental kind of things that were done with analog video - like Nam June Paik, his weird video mixing machines.

Phyllis: The Wobbulator!! Did you ever see his Wobbulator?

Thomas: Yeah!

Phyllis: Nam June! I made a piece - it’s funny that you’re mentioning this - I did a residency at the ETC - ohh it was so great! but it’s no longer around - it was the Experimental Television Center, which was up in Owego. It was this really great amazing place that has been around since the 70’s but they sadly closed recently. I did a residency up there and Nam June gave them one of his Wobbulators - which I used in a piece. It was really, really wonderful. You basically plug in your piece to it and you just literally turn these knobs and the piece kind of wobbles! (Laughs) it sounds so - kind of ridiculous but it’s wonderful!

Thomas: Sounds like a visual synthesizer.

Phyllis: Yeah- it's just like this (she makes a wobble sound with her mouth) and depending on how you turn the knobs literally it will go faster or slower. There's a horizontal one and a vertical one, you can just control it. I was creating parallel universes with that. It was great to use that. But the work- I am kind of more - I feel more at home with using work that's emotionally warm as opposed to crisp and cold. Not that crisp and cold always go together but it's just more of my aesthetic to work in that vein. Although I have done work that was - I don't know if I should say the word tight- but not as loose and organic as this work - it just depends on the piece.

Thomas: Phyllis, thank you so much for coming on the show and talking about your work.

Phyllis: Sure. Thanks for inviting me.