

Llaves a Dia de los Muertos or Day of the Dead Yves (telekinetic Skype) Essay

*Llaves a Dia de los Muertos or Day of the Dead Yves (telekinetic Skype)*¹ is my first video work (filmed in Pluma Hidalgo, Oaxaca, Mexico on Dia de Los Muertos, November 1 2017, after my Mexico City artist-in-residency and exhibition at Casa Lu). It's a leap I never thought I would take, and the road was long and windy. My first plan was to create a video work inspired by Ornette Coleman's white plastic saxophone (the sax he used for his legendary record *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (1959)). This video work was to be titled *The Legend of the white plastic sax (1959)*, and was the focus of an exhibition proposal I submitted to Dunedin Public Art Gallery (to be considered for their Moving Image program in 2018. My proposal was rejected). Ornette Coleman was a brilliant man; audacious, revolutionary, unorthodox - qualities that appeal to someone like me. I listen to him when I oil paint. It seems to be the best time. His story and music aside, I'm fascinated by the curious history of his white plastic sax. Coleman was born in Fort Worth, Texas 1930. He started working in a touring band in 1949. After a show in Louisiana he was robbed and beaten, and his sax was destroyed (adios sax!).

In 1954 he bought his first plastic sax. It's all he could afford. He hated it (he thought it sounded "drier" than metal). Looking past his creative genius, partiality towards the unorthodox and a tendency to break with traditions, structures and systems, aspects of his trademark sound are attributed to his plastic sax, a tool no one else thought of using (they thought it was ridiculous, obviously). I really relate to this story. It's about a poor coloured person who gets robbed of his creative tool, is too poor to buy a new one, and so he has to make do with what he can afford. And not only does he do a good job, he does arguably the best job in jazz. That's me, the artist. That's a lot of us artists. It's the majority of us, really. We can't afford to make what we want with what we want and need, so we make do with what we have. The saying *make something out of nothing* comes to mind, and Odysseus' key characteristic, *resourcefulness*, and the Ian Brown song *Crowing of the poor* (p.s. I named a show after this song).

Actually, this thinking reminds me of a fond memory of John Reynolds. Long story short, John's *Karangahape Road* painting, in the Davis family collection, inspired me to paint. I saw it for the first time around 2004, while doing landscaping with my friend Henry Davis up at the Davis' property in Northland (where the artwork lives). I was in awe of the artworks scale and the artists skill as a mark marker. As a tagger and illustration fan (rooted in an interest of skateboard graphics and Japanese cartoons), I really resonated with his mark marking - it seemed akin, it didn't alienate me like some art. It was my gateway drug. I met John at a dinner at the Davis', so I knew him by face from then on. Around 2007 he walked passed me while I had coffee with my then girlfriend. I shouted "John!". He come over and I showed him my new marker. My technologic device included a bottle of ink I had 'claimed' from art class and a rag I had stuffed into the lid (which acted as a nozzle or marker tip). It didn't have a lid. He was interested, so he invited me to his then downtown studio, around the corner from Show Girls, to show him how it worked. I used it on some paper he commonly used for his oil stick works at the time. He had a go to. It dripped like crazy and made marks around 10cm wide (maybe wider, I can't really remember). He put some music on and went out to lunch with his mom. I was there alone for about an hour and a half. I kept the door ajar with a cup while I went out for a smoke, so I didn't lock myself out. I got ink on his floor. I remember this story now as one of my most inventive, *plastic white sax* moments, where my invention imitated something I couldn't afford (i.e. expensive fat cap tagging markers). My homemade marker didn't perform anywhere near as good as the real thing, but it's make showed a willingness to get by and get things done, and I appreciate that now.

My reminiscing of this moment, and these ideas, are an important backdrop to the work I actually realised, *Llaves a Dia de los Muertos or Day of the Dead Yves (telekinetic Skype)*. It's a shame that *The Legend* wasn't

¹ Llaves translates to 'keys', implying there is a key to unlocking Dia de los Muertos (which translates to Day of the Dead), or that Dia de los Muertos is a code that needs to be, and can be, solved. Yves is Yonel Watene's nickname. Telekinetic Skype refers to a real or imagined telekinetic conversation using Skype. The nature of the conversation references Day of the Dead traditions, where the dead visit and communicate with the living.

realised, as it is with a lot of unrealised projects, but out of Failures ashes comes hope, and a beautiful correlation between the Living and Dead. *The Legend's* death, or non-life, was a sacrifice I needed for *Llaves* to live. These stories of invention, perseverance and resourcefulness really gave me the power to make this work. *The Legends* failure made me realise that isn't about history. Coleman, Odysseus, a younger me waving over John Reynolds, me today in 2018 - it's all about a way of thinking, an attitude, a willingness to 'do' despite being without. It's about survival. It's inherent to me, it never leaves. 'It' is never more important than it is *right now*, right at this very second - 'it's' got no value in hindsight. 'It' helps me get through today. 'It' helps me deal with the moment at hand. We can only deal with one thing at a time, and that's right now, right here and now. *Llaves* does just that. It centres in on the moment, Dia de Los Muertos. It deals with that day and that day only. *The Legends* failure made me realise that isn't about history, it's about living in the moment. It's about life.

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Like Coleman, I didn't use the tools I wanted or even needed to make a respectable artwork i.e. any half decent filming device, I used what I had i.e. my laptop camera in Photo Booth, my phone and the festive sound of Day of the Dead. Mexicans make these sounds with fireworks - latino style. I recorded these expressions on my Samsung smartphone while soaking in the moment. Mexican fireworks are very singular, maybe one or two BOOMS, with a lot of smoke and very little flare. They are simple and kind of terrifying at first, but they're amazing because the show just goes on and on and on. I always hated how short Kiwi fireworks displays are. Day of the Dead fireworks displays, in comparison, are just hectic, it never ends, and the kid in me loves that.

In hindsight, now that I'm back home in Aotearoa, I hear these frequencies and think less of fireworks and more of musical expression - a type of unorthodox expression, something other-wordly. I can't see the smoke or flare this far south, I can only hear the moment - and feel it deep inside me. This moment, Day of the Dead, is about inviting our dead whanau to visit the land of the living while barriers between realms are at its weakest. We entice them with their favourite things. I wanted to offer a joint for my dad, but I couldn't get any weed. I offered my skateboard for my brother. On the day I adopted this tradition. Without even knowing what I was doing, I went to my friends roof with my laptop, pressed record and looked into the screen. I saw my reflection. Or did I see them? Was I talking to myself, or was it to them? Was I even talking? Is the sound in the background what I think it is, or is it the shaky frequencies between realms, one Living, one Dead, where you're talking, but I can't quite hear what you're saying? *Llaves a Dia de los Muertos or Day of the Dead Yves (telekinetic Skype)* generates these questions. Most importantly, these questions represent possibilities, or even realities. There are no definitive answers. All that matters is how we feel, and what we feel. I felt close. That's all I'll say.