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Digging Below & Flying Above Knickerbocker

By **GARY SHAPIRO** | August 25, 2006

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'THE PAST IS NEVER DEAD,' WILLIAM FAULKNER WROTE, 'IT'S not even past.' Two New York artists, Carrie Dashow and Jesse Pearlman Karlsberg, collaborate on work that appears to examine this proposition.

Their ongoing project, the "Subliminal History of New York State" involves visiting specific local areas and creating participatory performances. They are explorers of space and time, investigating the human connection to the landscape over time. "The land," Ms. Dashow said, "has stories to tell and it tells them through people and buildings."

The ambitious aim of these graduates of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute is no less than "to broaden the scope of reality." As Mr. Karlsberg explained, "Though we are interested in evidence, all evidence is not empirical."

Their collaboration is not easily classifiable. "Interdisciplinary" comes closest. It has elements of industrial archaeology, folklore, history, visual culture, ethnomusicology, printmaking, conceptual art, and postmodern anthropology (though they themselves might not use these exact terms), expressed in a traveling Chautauqua performance. Their work overlaps with cultural geographers who seek to understand the effect of place and geography on humans.

Their work has a pedagogical aspect to it (holding workshops, teaching about local industry or history), yet their model is one in which everyone, including themselves, learns together.

Their subliminal history project is divided into "chapters," which are individual projects or performances following a narrative thread. In their account, Roosevelt Island wants to leave New York City: "In the first chapter, the island decides it's leaving and goes on this trip," Ms. Dashow said. Roosevelt Island does so after gaining sight through a lighthouse built on the island. The island eventually follows a route from the Hudson River to the Erie Canal over Niagara Falls to Lake Erie.

The pair plans next to participate in an arts festival in Peekskill in September. That work will relate to a meteorite that landed in the area in 1992.

Cement, lighthouse, meteorites —objects relating to locations both above and below the ground or sea — are recurrent themes in their work, which retains a utopian quality.

From her artist's residency on the ground floor of the AT&T building just below Canal Street, Ms. Dashow helped plan a workshop and concert last month at the Widow Jane Mine in

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Rosendale, N.Y., in Ulster County. An audience of 52 local residents, artists, historians, and others came out to sing songs, whose lyrics told the story of Rosendale cement, which has a highclay content, and became widely used in the 1800s. "The rocks have emigrated to all parts of the country" and can be found in many structures, including the Brooklyn Bridge. "One of the goals is to understand the connections better," she said.

The performance involved "shape note singing," which is a simplified pictographic way to learn to read music. The singing, Mr. Karlsberg said, is a common social activity. He added, "We create a space together with these people. We teach people how to sing and they run the performance."

One song called "Mortal Mortar Made of Death" highlighted how limestone contains fossils. The audience sang in four-part harmony:

As tiny creatures dropped their lives,
Sang sinking to the bottom sand,
Beneath a salty water den
To coalesce again again.
Bones wedged together cast with time,
A mortal mortar made of death,
Into the ceiling we can see
Millenniums of zoology.

As if the day has never changed,
Clay bodies broken bridges made;
Bright by the light of lime we see
Two hundred years' humanity.

One who was receptive to the idea that not all evidence was empirical was a veteran editor at the old New York Sun, Francis Church, who responded in 1897 to a young girl who had written to ask if Santa Claus existed. Replying famously, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus," Church asserted that human intelligence was not "capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge":

You tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart.

From Icarus to Da Vinci onward, humans have dreamed of flying. The author Michael Abrams spoke at Barnes & Noble last week about this impulse in discussing "Birdmen, Batmen and Skyflyers: Wingsuits and the Pioneers who Flew in Them, Fell in Them and Perfected Them" (Harmony Books). People jumping from high altitude dressed in wing-like contraptions were a quixotic phenomenon that grew in the 1930s and '40s and had a later revival in the two subsequent decades. "A lot of them died," he said.

"Theirs was the true history of flight, it seemed to me — one that the airplane had usurped," Mr. Abrams said. He described one daredevil who trailed flour behind him for effect.

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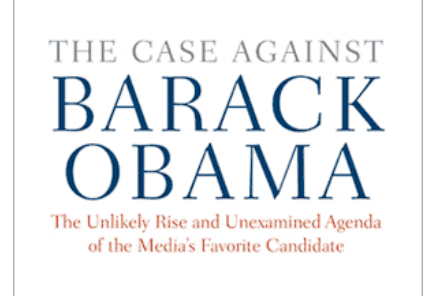
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