

KOPENHAGEN MAGASIN

02.07.2012 INTERVIEW



Mary Coble: *Maneuvering with Difficulty: Mike and November*, 2012. Performance. Foto: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy: Overgaden.

Maneuvering

The exhibition *Maneuvering* by **Mary Coble** is the result of numerous studies based on the abandoned shipyard in Nakskov, which she first experienced when she moved to Denmark in 2010.

I met Mary for an inspiring conversation, which in many ways came to be about maneuvering in different ways. The interview was based on the work *Maneuvering with Difficulty (Mike and November)*. This work became the current installation, which can be seen in the first large room of Overgaden, during a performance conducted by Mary at the opening on the 15th of June. The performance part of the piece went on for an hour, where Mary hoisted a series of colorful flags, each made up of 4 examples of the signal-flags ships use to communicate with each other at sea. For each flag and for each combination of flags that were hoisted, the string of flags was attached to a hook in Overgadens wall and a phrase such as; *I am in distress. I Do not see any light. I am drifting* was written in ink on the wall next to the hook.

Simply because of the length of the performance the experience could well have been something of an ordeal for myself, as I often have a somewhat strained relationship with the genre – which I also, dutifully had to admit to Mary. However, it was an incredibly positive experience to witness, and because of this, the performance became the focal point of conversation.

Mary Coble (f. 1978) is educated from The George Washington University i Washington DC, 2004. She has had several solo exhibitions and has performed live numerous times, including the piece *Fighting Cocks* during *Commitment Issues: A Night of Performance*, FADO Performance Art Network, Toronto, 2011, and *Asylum* at ALT_CPH 11, Copenhagen, 2011. Mary Coble is professor at Funen Art Academy and lives i Copenhagen.

AF LINE MARIE THORSEN

Lets start by talking about this piece (*Maneuvering with Difficulty (Mike and November)*). Could you tell me about the concept behind the performance and resulting installation?

I should start by talking about the photographic panels in the exhibition *Shipyard: From Mike to November*, because they represent the foundation of the performance and installation. They were taken at the now abandoned shipyard at

Nakskov. I went there as one of my first trips when I came to Denmark, to the Tumult Art festival, and there were two artists, Nina Fischer & Maroan el Sani who made an amazing video in the shipyard. I went back again after the festival and noticed the floors of the shipyard, and have been photographing it since. The floor is gigantic and holds the history of over 230 ships because the shipwrights drew the designs for the ships directly onto the floor. I was drawn at first to the aesthetic qualities, I mean it is beautiful, and this is also where it becomes really interesting because that quality became an entry point that led me in lots of exciting directions. At first I wanted to document the entire floor piece by piece, but I felt that it lost something in that, that idea alone became very flat. The resulting images are one's I've chosen that form a narrative of sorts that relate to the performance and installation. I started looking more into the shipyard and I found a list of all the ships that had been built there. That created another layer of the archive that the shipyard represented to me. That's also where the title for the installation/performance came from. The first ship built there was called Mexico and the last called Niels Klim. I starting thinking that these two ships being the first and the last, had special positions in the history.

So this is where the performance *Maneuvering with Difficulty (Mike and November)*, came into being. *Mike to November* comes from the names Mexico and Niels Klim transposed through the International Code of Signals. Here the letter M would be communicated as Mike and the letter N as November. I started to look at these photographs, the drawing on the floor, as kind of a coded language and I thought of what other codes I could draw out of this. Most flags hanging in the installation are made up of two symbols each, and what I did during the performance was, as a first action to raise all the flags halfway so one message could be seen. Then I secured the flag to the wall and wrote what the symbol could be read as, such as " My vessel is stopped. Making no way". The next action was that I raised various flags into different positionings, which in my mind created a new dialogue, because once a flag is raised full, you get a whole other code. Sailors would have a manual to read all of the various flag combinations. This is also what formed the sound in the installation, which is a conversation between Mike and November. I constructed this conversation using only sentences from the signal manual. I thought of it as a narrative being created through flag-codes, about a relationship, perhaps a love story where there is difficulty in communicating and connecting.

I don't know if I thought of it as a love story, but I definitely thought about these codes becoming representative of something very human, like some basic conditions of human relations these flags all of a sudden got to correspond to, as they were raised. What surprised me was also the huge translation process, from a quite mechanical raising and lowering of the flags and inscription of code, to realising the very humane statements they also represented, adding an whole other layer to the idea of manoeuvring.

Yeah of course, various ways of maneuvering is a key to the show and actually important to a lot of my work and how I experience my process. I think about some of my older work where the message is very direct, and I think that this project comes about some of the same questions at a slightly different angle that takes a little time to digest and figure out.

At the performance Friday I felt that it was very meditative, and for the first time in a while I had the experience of getting to know a work from a kind of first-hand experience, instead of reading my way into it - if that makes any sense?

Sure, I think you actually just pinpointed what I think is so special about live performance, being in the moment and reading it as it is occurring. A live piece can create a space that has the potential to be very different than looking at a still object on a wall or even a video. It's a different process, because you are in the experience. It pretty special being amongst the viewers as a piece is happening, and for me it can add a dynamic where even a passive viewer becomes a kind of participant.

I think there was a very informal aspect of how you did this performance, perhaps because it didn't seem like you were staging yourself, but rather staging the object of the performance - making them perform instead. I think as a viewer this grants you another form of access...

That's a good reading, because I wouldn't feel comfortable being on a stage in front of a lot of people watching. I considered the space where I did the performance as one being without boundaries, people could have been moving around, looking at the text on the walls as I was writing it. But there is always a barrier in a way when you are doing a live piece, because people are used to the dynamics of traditional stage performance where space is denoted in specific ways. I was engaged with manipulating the objects, in creating a visual conversation, and moving through the

space. I had set up a task without completely knowing how I would interact with the space and how a live audience would affect the piece, so within certain parameters we were experiencing the piece in the same way.

I think this also formed a kind of symbolic action, in the way that you and the people watching, actually manoeuvred around according to the performance.

Yeah, and that was one of those exiting and unexpected moments that can happen during a live piece. Surprising things will happen and definitely occurred several times with this piece. Sometimes the audience dictated how I manoeuvred in the space, and at other times my actions moved the viewers.

Another exciting moment for me occurred in relationship to my actions and the conversation between Mike and November that can be heard in the space. I started the performance by raising the first flag that says "I wish to communicate with you" as a subtle entry. The very last flag I raised read as "I'm maneuvering with difficulty". As I was writing this on the wall I heard that sentence being spoken in the sound piece. That is one of those moments where I think, "oh this is amazing" and I wonder if anyone else is seeing this.

I definitely noticed, and I thought that it rounded up the performance so beautifully that it had to be planned out...

Yeah, but I could have never planned for that to happen. For me this is a special experience that can happen in a live piece and one of those moments where I get something very powerful back from the work.

Thank you.



Mary Coble: *Maneuvering with Difficulty: Mike and November*, 2012. Performance. Courtesy: Overgaden.



Mary Coble: *Shipyard: From Mike to November*, 2012, Inkjet print. Courtesy: Overgaden.



Mary Coble & Blithe Riley: *Watermarks*, 2012. Video, 22 min. Foto: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy: Overgaden.



Mary Coble: *Fall*, 2009, Video, 45 min. . Foto: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy: Overgaden.



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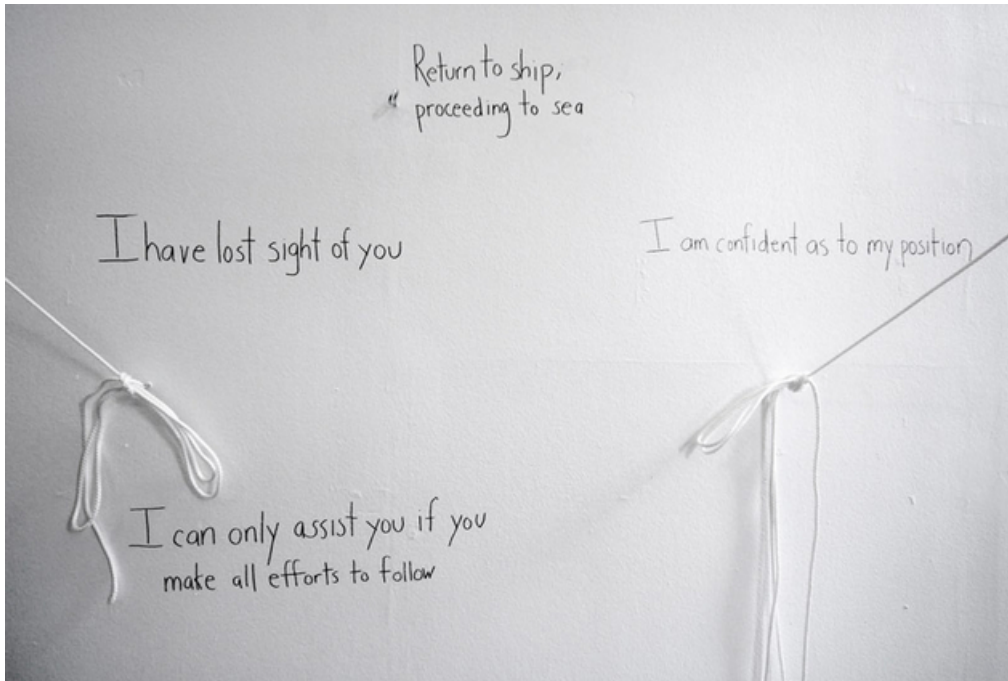
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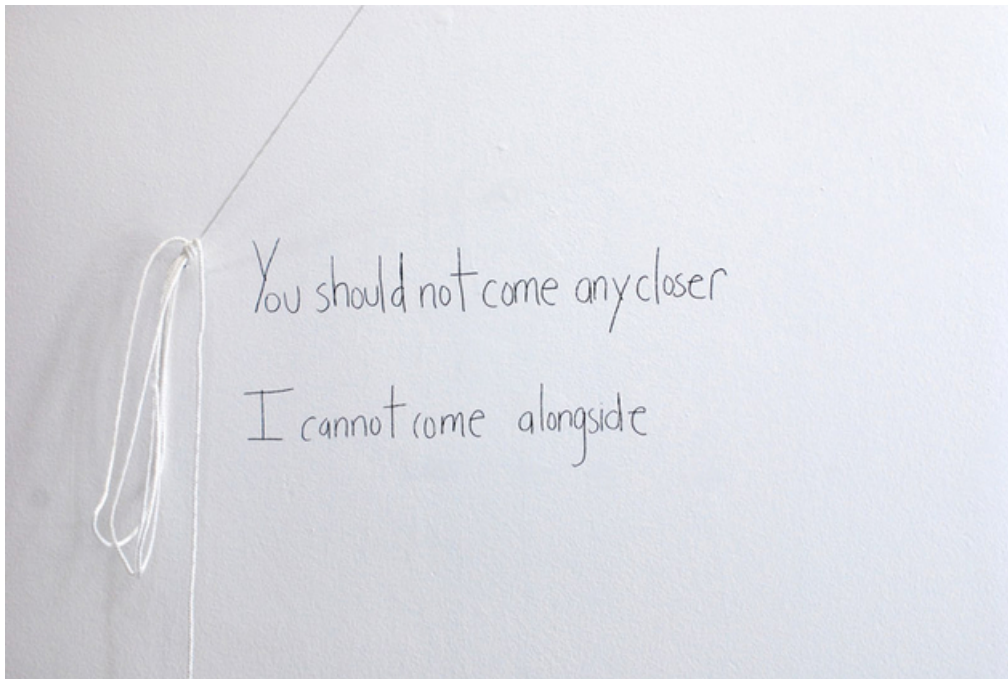
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