

## **Emotional Intelligence: Amy Caron and *Waves of Mu***

Conceived as a proposal for Room, the PS122 program that commissions artists to collaborate with authorities from other disciplines, Amy Caron's *Waves of Mu* has been successful in its multidimensional exploration of neuroscience, emotional intelligence, and the plasticity of the human brain. In the year preceding its arrival at the PS122, *Waves* has made an impact on a national scale and engaged hundreds of viewers as a gesamtkunstwerk of performance and installation.

*Waves of Mu* premiered at the Firehouse Gallery of Burlington City Arts, a not-for-profit contemporary gallery and art center in Burlington, Vermont. As the hosts of this experience, our curatorial staff was privy to the development of the performance piece and the role it assumed in engaging visitors and members of the local medical community. Sharing the project in a Grand Rounds lecture at the University of Vermont College of Medicine Department of Neurology strengthened its tie to the subject, setting the tone for the work. Most revelational, however, was how Caron's information heavy subject matter coupled with the pluralism of her approach made way for something else: education via contemporary art.

The teaching potential of the piece is realized through its emphatic accessibility, offered by physical and emotional experiences. Achieved with a combination of sensory provocations including sound, kinetic sculpture, tactile engagement, visual, olfactory, and taste sensations, the piece is immersive. Removing the traditional distance that galleries and museums provide, both the installation and performance are intimate and immediate, and the viewer becomes *part* of the total work.

Two major elements work together to complete this piece. The installation room serves first as a mechanism for interpreting social behavior and placing it in the context of neurology. Upon entering a three dimensional anatomy of the brain, participants unwittingly fulfill the role of electronic neural messengers. The very way participants share, discuss, and form communities around the various representational elements illustrates the content of the piece: the empathetic power of the mirror neuron and its connection to social phenomenon. As a catalyst of these ideas, the performance induces viewers into a series of empathetic experiences that ultimately shed light on the essential quality of human communication. In addition, the performance explores two disorders to which the discovery of the mirror neuron works to illuminate: Autism and Asperger Syndromes. Caron's careful attention to these disorders, through both the gathering of expert research and her interpretative performance, is significant in that viewers are granted an emotional understanding that compliments the theoretical knowledge. Further, the inclusion of various performers, volunteers, and multiple contributing visual artists continues the acting metaphor for brain functioning, highlighting the human need for connectivity and proving to be a manifestation of its subject.

In this way, the piece is less concerned with formal elements; the majority of installation components were commissioned by Caron to other artists and designers. Similarly, other performance and visual artists such as Allora and Calzadilla's work with

objects is functional or representative, at times using the artwork of others to contribute to their point. This is so in *Puerto Rican Light*, a Dan Flavin piece that is illuminated by light the pair generated from solar panels in Puerto Rico and stored in car batteries. The Flavin piece acts as a vessel for exposing sustainable energy practice. This collaborative, subject- first-and-formal-issues-second attitude is interesting and relevant, pointing to a paradigm of art making that is concerned with sharing concrete information and ideas over anything else. In this way, *Waves* can become a mechanism— a vessel that contains information and serves as a cathartic educational experience for the viewer.

Thus notable about *Waves* is its emphasis on collaboration as well as its success as a didactic work. With the visual and performance elements gathered rather than generated, Caron serves as both creator and curator of the experience. In terms of subject matter, Caron began her research of neuroscience, and particularly the electromagnetic oscillations that reflect mirror neuron activity in the brain, by reaching out to academics in the field. Contributors include Lindsay Oberman Ph.D., Harvard researcher, V.S. Ramashandran of UCSan Diego, VittorioGallesi of the University of Parma, Italy, and others. While they have all done significant work relating to mirror neurons, the brain and behavior interfaces, Caron was able to organize the way in which their contributions functioned to make a cohesive understanding of the discovery.

While not all of their theories are in complete alignment, the general consensus is that the mirror neuron is any neuron that “describes the self/other barrier”, the way in which our brain processes the actions or sensations of others and relates them to ourselves. This complex finding soon lead to an exploration of the phenomenon of empathy, and its link to our emotional and imitative intelligence. Revealing new knowledge about the composition of the mind, thinking about also worked to illuminate the vital link between it and social interconnectivity, and in turn, our evolution as a species.

Caron emphasizes that she is not an expert in the field of neuroscience, but more acts as a translator between two typically isolationist communities, those of scientific research and contemporary art. On the way, she is able to educate as an artist who represents information in a way that evokes an emotional reaction.

The use of this method provokes the line of inquiry: are we seeing an influx of artists using interpretive mediums to disseminate empirical information? Are contemporary artists searching for substantive, “non fiction” subject matter as a prevailing characteristic, and if so, why? Either way, the use of emotionally evocative/empathy driven education is a valid and enterprising endeavor.

In the end, the piece inverts itself, engaging in both process-level perception as well as content-level perception. The viewer experiences a spontaneous realization in tracing a link from empathy to a fundamental pattern in our biological makeup, one essential to our survival. This is Caron’s final message from the academics, brought through the very act of collaborative sharing that the entire piece practices.

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