

## Travelling to Limbo

The Universe of Jennifer Tee

210

[ DAVID STROBAND ]

A long time ago I visited a strange and wonderful world. It was 1999 in Amsterdam, and in the Stedelijk Museum Bureau I entered a universe that had been scattered there by the artist Jennifer Tee (1973).

I remember it as if it were yesterday. There was one part of that remarkable world, with all its objects and film images, that particularly sticks in my mind. It's a film loop depicting a girl, with great agility sitting on her backside with a frying pan in one hand with which she tries to fend off a salvo of onions. We see the girl – it is Jennifer Tee herself – struggling alternately to repel the onions being fired at her by an onion-ball cannon, and to work a green plastic switchboard by which she operates the same cannon. Tee's act, which is filmed in such a way that she seems to be hitting the onions straight at the viewer, is utterly absurd. She's highly agitated. The onions must be kept from touching the body of the very person who is simultaneously firing them. On the other



Jennifer Tee,  
*Eternal Feminine*. 2009.  
Ceramic shell with porcelain glaze,  
135 x 113 x 74 cm.  
Photo by Gert Jan van Rooij. Courtesy of Galerie Fons Welters.

hand, this performance is actually extremely funny because it's so totally pointless. Completed in 1997 and entitled *Onions attack/Jennifer Tee in defense*, it's a splendid example of slapstick comedy. But it was only one small link in the exhibition *Down the chimney*, a title that seems to refer to a transit rather like that in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*: a passage to an unknown reality (see: Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen, *Jennifer Tee. Down the chimney*, in: *10 years SMBA: We show art*, 2003, Amsterdam, p. 353).

Any author who tries to pin down Jennifer Tee's work runs a considerable risk of failure. Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen, however, describes the character of her presentations with crystal clarity: '*Down the chimney is such a multi-layered and eccentric viewing experience – like being parachuted in broad daylight into the realm of fantasy, dream and nightmare. Tee's installation in Bureau Amsterdam is a model for the all-over approach that she's been experimenting with since her student days at the Rietveld Academy. She's out to create an entire world that carries the viewer along and presents him with a choice: either fully accept and undergo the experience, or run away.*' In the same article Van Nieuwenhuyzen quotes a comment by the Swedish art critic Maria Lind. Lind characterised the kind of spatial productions staged by Tee and other artists of the late nineties as '*ambient spaces*': '*Atmospheric spaces that transport the viewer to a place that differs from reality in every way but which have often been created on the basis of information from that reality.*'

Indeed, while wandering around *Down the chimney* I was overcome by the feeling that Alice had taken me by the hand and was leading me into a parallel world.

Let me try to describe this *Wonderland*. You enter the exhibition through a jungle of plants lit by bright fluorescent lights, in which a crouching human figure with a white duck's tail and a duck mask sits looking backwards. The back of this portrait of the artist is riddled with buckshot. As you continue walking, behind a curtain a dream-like landscape unfolds, where penguin-like creatures have arranged themselves in groups. Around them are a number of upended buckets on which you can sit to keep these creatures company. Running down from the roof is a tunnel-shaped form, and projected on panels that look like ice floes is the image of a figure in a fur coat whose face is turned away from the viewer. At the back of the room a grotesque tortoise is lying in a bed. At the same time, all manner of video images can be seen on the walls: scenes in which individuals in fancy dress chase each other, engage in stick fights and are involved in a variety of strange games. These film images derive from the rituals and private mythology of the Tee family: father, mother and two daughters. Jennifer had asked her family to take a tape recorder and fill a 60-minute videotape with stories that they otherwise would have kept to themselves. Secret stories, dreams and anxieties – it all had to come out in the open. Tee selected the fragments with the strongest visual content and used them as the starting-point for the script of the video projections described above. Using existing narrative structures and acting techniques such as exaggeration, her parents, her sister and herself acted out the fragments. This resulted in a quick succession of scenes with images of '*a group of individuals dressed in animal suits, fairy-tale dresses and other fantasy clothing that abandons itself to a wild game of musical chairs, stick fights and other activities that are a cross between innocent entertainment and cutthroat competition*' (see: Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen).

All of which amounts to a hallucinatory experience for the viewer. No un-

ambiguous meanings to be found here. You might well conclude that in *Down the chimney* Tee has been conducting research on the codes and structures of her nearest and dearest. This is family anthropology, portrayed in a magnified, ritualised form.

Tee's worlds are kaleidoscopic in character. Your consciousness is constantly in transition; it keeps ending up in another layer. She links together a whole host of domains, each with its own stories and references, and also combines different perceptions of time. Film, performance and environment merge effortlessly in Tee's projects. In a film you're in a different time, in a performance you're in the here and now, and when entering an environment you lose your sense of time entirely.

In 1999 I left the 'Tee domain' in Amsterdam with my head spinning. Should I surrender to this intense, strange, fairy-tale world, or escape at once into the seemingly comprehensible world outside? Then I saw a girl on a bicycle with a plastic bag on her handlebars. I wondered whether the bag might contain a frying pan and twenty onions. And then I knew I was on the right path: the 'Tee path'.

## Wild zones

*Jennifer Tee, I REVOLT (1), 2008. Friso Kramer chair white/white, 48 x 48 x 80 cm. Silicone wax cast of arm 12 x 12 x 60 cm Edition 3*

*Bit by Bit/woman holding her balance mobile. 2009. 3.15 m x 3.2 cm x 4 mm.*

*Brass, silicone teeth, 2 rock-crystals, 2 ceramic birds, 20 x 15 x 37 cm.*

*Photo by Gert Jan van Rooij. Courtesy of Galerie Fons Welters.*

For a number of years, Jennifer Tee used a collective name for the works she presented in museums and galleries in various places: *TotalTeeTransformers*. And she did indeed transform each space put at her disposal into a colour and media experience with several levels of meaning, thereby creating a total experience for the viewer. Handmade ceramics and porcelain, textiles, bamboo from China, lamps, a Brazilian palm tree: these are but a few of the materials that Tee incorporates in her works. Forms that are strongly suggestive of benches, chandeliers, tents, fans, banners bearing texts, an altar or a totem pole feature regularly. And she works with the most varied types of presentation, such as environments, sculptors, video and performances.

In 2001, while studying at the Rijksacademie in Amsterdam, she had a group of Mongolian throatsingers perform at set times in her studio. In *Jen & The Throatsingers*, Tee was firmly in control. Seated on a bean-bag hanging high up on one of the walls, she used a cable to raise a large tent printed with all sorts of semi-mythological motifs. This then revealed the throatsingers, who started singing as soon as the tent was raised and died away whenever Tee let it drop back down. Mixed throatsinger drinks were served to the visitors. So Tee also performs as a director, and she gives the participants in her work a great deal of leeway. In this case the participants weren't only the Mongolian throatsingers; the audience were invited to have a drink as part of the work and so made their own contribution to *TotalTeeTransformers*, though probably without realising it. In 2001 Tee also performed in the group exhibition *Wild Zone* at the Witte de With art centre in Rotterdam, with *Blowtorch The Hood, Crossdress, Trespass*. *Wild Zone* refers to a kind of protected space within a tightly organised society. It's a place where experiments can be conducted and parallel worlds created alongside our everyday, regimented society. The various components of *Blowtorch The Hood, Crossdress, Trespass* have titles like *Wax Mountain Cake* and *Rotating Carwash Skirts*, titles that don't really explain anything but, in their absurdist poetry, themselves form part of the work. Rapid video images of motorcycle

paces alternate with mountainous landscapes made of black wax, a number of aprons arranged to look like the brushes in a car wash, and innumerable little sculptures made of ceramic and paper, the *Chinese Ladybirds*. Tee drew inspiration from the hip-hop scene and the culture of motorbike races. These works, too, lack any well-defined story-lines; each seemingly readable code within the work is dismantled by the next visual element. Tee combines all sorts of little stories and uses this assembled reality to translate her fascination with the conditioning and manipulative effect that subcultures can have on us.

### A soul in the state of Limbo

Jennifer Tee is deeply fascinated by mythological stories, religion and anthropology. Stories and other typically human traditions such as rituals constitute important sources for her work. However, she is anything but a classical storyteller.

Ann Demeester made the following observations about Tee's work in an article she wrote for a catalogue. She begins by quoting from a speech by the English artist Steve McQueen: "*Art is like catching butterflies.*" *This is especially true of Tee's work, which functions as a microcosm in which only her own laws ap-*





ply. The work resists further semiotic vivisection. It is unsteady and temperamental, showing an extreme fluency in thinking (everything leads to something else) and a constant flux and reflux of volatile ideas. [...] Tee employs sign systems that are not based on agreements between the artist and the audience. She formulates an idiosyncratic visual language, whose lack of conventional legibility makes it only partially accessible for the viewer. This “flawed” communication process conjures up a kind of *Verratselung*; the work becomes mysterious and to a degree indecipherable. After all, Tee is not so much concerned with representation as she is with presence.’ (Ann Demeester, *Wandering, straying and losing one’s way in Territorium Tee: On ordered delirium and organized trance*, in *E\*V\*O\*L\*E\*Y\*E – LAND\*S\* -END*, 2004, São Paulo, p. 7)

Tee searches for hidden stories and rituals within her own family, and in her work she investigates subcultures that have the potential to exert a great deal of influence on people. Tee is not an anthropologist. Her quests do not result in analyses; on the contrary, they generate atmospheres that are full of riddles and mystery. But for all that, her works are very precisely and deliberately composed.

Jennifer Tee,  
Complex Interiors - Trance-  
lucent Concrete. 2009. The  
unfolding of awareness and  
opening up/*structures of  
consciousness*. 2009.  
6 wooden beams, 300 x 4,5  
x 4,5 cm each. Rope, paper  
Floor, protea flower,  
220 x 300 x 225 cm. Photo  
by Gert Jan van Rooij. Cour-  
tesy of Galerie Fons Welters.



Jennifer Tee, Inside:  
*Bound to escape*. Silicone cast  
of bound hands and feet,  
35 x 25 x 22 cm. Photo by  
Gert Jan van Rooij. Courtesy  
of Galerie Fons Welters

A ritual consists of a concentrated set of rules and regulations that are meant to induce a consciousness-raising if not transcendental experience in those participating. Tee makes use of visual elements that refer to rituals: the tent, the altar, materials taken from a whole range of cultures. But these elements provide only the most temporary of hand-holds. Demeester's description suggests that Tee's worlds, peopled with associations and a range of symbols from cultures and religions, are a churning sea full of ideas and thoughts. It is this very lack of solid ground, and the synchronous activation of so many perceptions and thoughts, that she directs with such precision. In her presentations she invites the viewer to enter into an 'in-between state'. Tee calls this condition 'The Soul in Limbo'. 'The Soul in Limbo' has clear cultic connotations. When you surrender yourself to a ritual, you undertake a rite of passage. Your consciousness passes through various stages and you end up in a parallel world, where the consciousness may be liberated from time and place.<sup>[1]</sup> Tee describes these processes in a number of jottings she made under the heading *Mindtrails in Memory Palace*:



Jennifer Tee,  
*Down the Chimney, Sitting Duck*. 1998. Colour photo on  
 multiplex,  
 edition: 5. Courtesy of  
 Galerie Fons Welters.

- *Making a sculpture out of a moment. A sculpture out of a moment = a situational structure.*

*A festival is a moment of intensity that gives meaning and shape to life.*

- *Every opening, or exhibition should be some kind of festival or event.*

- *Creating an environment where people, objects and space connect in a way that a temporary liberating moment can be experienced, and where a temporary unity is sought between life and consciousness.*

- *A natural liberating moment – A natural liberation brought about by understanding the in-between state*

-*In-between state: a soul in the state of limbo.*

[*Mindtrails in Memory Palace*, in *E\*V\*O\*L\*E\*Y\*E –LAND\*S\* –END*, 2004, São Paulo, p. II.]

Tee likes to explore various forms of presentation that might strengthen her consciousness-expanding intentions: the performance, but also the ceremony and the happening. These three forms of cultural expression frequently occur as elements in a festival. She notes her preference for the festival form in a number of notes under the heading *Festival Tactics*:

- *The tactic of disappearance, revolution of the everyday, for the good thing, for the marvellous. In art: replacing representation with presence.*

Jennifer Tee,  
*Down the Chimney*. Instal-  
 lation overview. Stedelijk  
 museum Bureau Amsterdam.  
 1999. Courtesy of Galerie  
 Fons Welters.



- *Re-integrating an aesthetic into the system of daily life. Immediate participation in a passionate abundance of ordinary, empty life.*
  - *Spontaneity, play and festival are essential for a transformative lucid life. And allows otherwise passive individuals insight into the otherwise stultifying nature of boring and non-ludic existenzzz...*
  - *Play has the tendency to be beautiful, into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life, it brings a temporary, limited perfection. Play is enhanced by secrecy and forms a standstill to ordinary life.*
- [*Festival Tactics*, in *E\*V\*O\*L\*E\*Y\*E -LAND\*S\* -END*, 2004, São Paulo. p. IV]

This indicates that in her works Tee is seeking to create conditions that lift the viewer out of his familiar patterns of consciousness and allow him to gaze beyond the borders.

In Tee's own words, '*As a quasi-ethnologist, I create poetic moods that are located between fact and fiction, between the present and the past, in an attempt to answer those questions and longings that cannot be put into words.*'

This aim – to open up a greater consciousness – lies by definition at the heart of religious and mythological traditions. It can thus be concluded that Tee's worlds contain forces capable of generating new myths.



Jennifer Tee (who has an English-Dutch mother and a Chinese father, and was born in Indonesia) has travelled widely throughout the world. She has spent longer periods of time in, among other places, Latin America (Brazil and Peru), the United States, Mongolia, China and Indonesia, where she studied local customs, rituals, social patterns and historic and cultural sites. Her many discoveries resurfaced in her works in the form of authentic materials, local symbols and linguistic fragments from traditional sources. The same is true of the interpretation of a wide range of rituals expressed in her performances .

The exhibition *In air I presume \*\*\* The non-logical hunt for toverknaal* (2001, Stedelijk Museum Het Domein in Sittard, the Netherlands) contains a whole range of impressions from her travels to Brazil. There she studied *Candomble*, an Afro-Brazilian religion that combines African beliefs with Catholicism, but she also fell under the spell of two artists: Helio Oiticica (1937-1980) and Oyvind Fahlstrom, a Swede born in Brazil (1928-1967). These artists used modern rituals as a means of combining art and everyday life in a way that is quite organic. Works by Oiticica and Fahlstrom are included in her exhibition. Within her presentation, Tee enters into dialogue with their works and ideas (sometimes in the form of a performance).

Tee's open attitude towards so many sources of inspiration is also reflected in the exhibition *Nameless Swirls, An Unfolding in Presence* (2003, Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, the Netherlands). Here Tee invited three other artists to join her as co-exhibitors: Roe Cerpac, Harmen Liemburg and Erwan Maheo. The four of them planned the exhibition together and created the works for it. Tee was no longer the sole responsible author: her signature now stood for a collaborative effort. Study of this exhibition produced a number of interesting points of view on the artist's position: as a maker of original images or, conversely, as someone who copies the ideas of predecessors and contemporaries. Several other sources were also included in this presentation, among them a number of works from the Van Abbemuseum's collection. For example, Tee featured a facsimile of a 'psychogeographic' map by the Situationist Guy Debord (1932-1994) in the exhibition.

Tee derives a great deal of inspiration from the ideas of the International Situationists and their leader, the Frenchman Debord. As early as the 1950s he formulated conditions for letting people move about freely and without restriction. The International Situationist Central encouraged small groups of people to roam through the city at will. These wanderings, called *Derive* (drifting randomly through the metropolitan environment), must not have any goal or serve any purpose; in this way people were free to experience their environment openly and without making any value-judgments, thus allowing them to develop into free, creative beings. Linked to these *Derive* was the notion of 'psycho-geography', a reinterpretation of the city on the basis of personal experiences and emotions.

An important basis for the work *Covert Entwined Heart – An Outburst Of Passion In Limbo* (2006, Galerie Klerks, Milan) is the book *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) by the cultural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009). In it Levi-Strauss describes the loss of the tropics and other relatively recently developed areas, such as Brazil, and he writes from a feeling of longing, melancholy and nostalgia. The book, which laments the disappearance of the pure and untouched,

moved Tee deeply; at the same time it also made her aware of our craving for the exotic and glorification, often based on false reasoning, of this so-called 'strangeness'. *Covert Entwined Heart* consists of a shape rather like a DNA double helix and an element that closely resembles a heart radiating warmth. The entire installation can be set in motion by means of two mill-like forms placed on either side. The heart-shape seems to symbolise a moment of passion, the 'in-between' situation of falling in love and intuition. A freshly-felled palm tree, hanging upside down, cleaves the heart and refers to the 'smell' of the unspoiled wild.

## A balloon trip

In the first half of the nineteenth century the Frenchman J.J. Grandville (pseudonym for Ignace Isidore Gerard) made satirical drawings and also illustrated works like the Fables of Lafontaine. His book *Un autre monde* (1844) contains illustrations by Grandville but also a story written by Taxile Delord (another of Gerard's pseudonyms). This fantastic story, which provided inspiration for one of Tee's works in São Paulo, describes a disturbing, futuristic world in which anthropoid beasts and man-like machines have bizarre adventures and a variety of objects, including chandeliers, come to life. One of the main characters is Hahbelle, who leaves the world by balloon in order to get a bird's-eye view of it.

*'Hahbelle's balloon trip could well be the perfect metaphor for the eternal human desire to discover unknown worlds [...]. It constitutes the adventure of the mind. From this viewpoint any kind of "exoticism" – essentially the longing for the "other" and the "elsewhere" – is at the same time a longing for our own "inner jungle" – the element of the "wild" and "unknown" within ourselves that eludes definition – our dark instincts and secret yearnings.'* (Ann Demeester, *Wandering, straying and losing one's way in Territorium Tee. On ordered delirium and organized trance*, in E\*V\*O\*L\*E\*Y\*E –LAND\*S\* –END, 2004, São Paulo, p. 14)

Here Ann Demeester is describing the world of Jennifer Tee, who wants to take us along on *her* balloon trip to an unknown world. Tee's multiple worlds are strictly autonomous. They exhibit the same apparent independence: being transported out of the world around us evokes strong references to the way in which overseas territories were perceived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In her work, Tee seems to be investigating the melancholy longing for the exotic, the pure and what is by definition 'the other'. She evokes the longing, but she also presents it as a problem by using so many modern multimedia methods to express it. The kaleidoscopic character of her work also applies to the number of sources she taps. On her website *TEE TEE TEE* she has created a personal index in which her sources are arranged in alphabetical order. This index is a suitable key for getting to know her work from a whole range of contexts. A random selection of topics from this list: 'Amazing Fountains, Bloem der Minnenden, Burle Marx, Die Kreuzigung, Favela, House (Bed Bolide), I want I want, Lao-Tze, Memnon Statues, Moon Gates, Nintoku Kofun, Protea Flower, Rorschach-tekening, Spielkarten, Toraja Huizen, Vuur en Wolk, Wolf Teeth.'

In the late spring of 2009 Jennifer Tee mounted an exhibition at the Fons Welters Gallery in Amsterdam. According to the press release the title of the exhibition, *Complex Interiors – Trance-lucent Concrete*, refers 'to inner structures and spaces, seemingly but never immediately comprehensible'. This is something



Jennifer Tee,  
*Covert entwined heart*. 2004.  
 Metal, bamboo, textile, foam,  
 300 x 200 x 180 cm. Cour-  
 tesy of Galerie Fons Welters.

that was already present in her previous works. Indeed, for a long time now Tee has been inviting us to overstep the bounds of space and time.

The experience her work offers us now, though, is not the same as it was. A number of sculptures are positioned in the interior of the gallery. They look as if they have withdrawn onto little islands and are demanding to be looked at individually. The 'overall' experience provided by the earlier work is no longer relevant here. These separate works don't seem to be competing with each other or falling into each others' arms.

Two wooden octagonal shapes with ceramic feathers dangling from them (*Falling Feathers*) hang in the middle of the gallery. A construction of diagonally placed wooden beams is held together in the shape of a pentagon by cords: '*The unfolding of awareness and opening up/ structures of consciousness*'. The work *Bit by Bit, woman holding her balance mobile*, consists of an enormous copper bow. Hanging from each end of the bow are wires with ceramic birds and pieces of rock crystal. The copper bow is also clad in white teeth. These sculptures still look like ritual objects. They seem to demand concentrated devotion and study. With all their fantastic beauty, the sculptures function as small spaces in which a multiplicity of ideas is stored. I would like to call them 'frames of mind' because they're still capable of allowing thoughts to fly in and out.

The fact that Tee continues to cherish her inspired underlying principles is evident from the performance *Totem Today Prologue* (2008, Intervention Weekend PAMFLAT, Subway track Bijlmer, Amsterdam). In this work, Tee en-

gaged a number of extras to carry 'word totems' around between the grey concrete columns of the Metro tracks in Amsterdam Zuid-Oost. Among the members of Indian tribes, totems functioned as signs to distinguish the individual. Families within a tribe would honour their ancestors by means of the totem, which bore images referring to their forefathers. On Tee's totems could be read words such as: *'Be longing, Tussenstaat, Local Myths, Glimpse of Real Life'*. These are the terms with which she honours her 'forefathers', and with them the power of life itself. ■

Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier

## NOTES

1. The French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep published *Les rites de passage* in 1909. In it he divides rites of passage into three phases: segregation, transition and reintegration. In the first phase, people distance themselves from the normal, the everyday, and begin to move from one place or state of being to another. In the second phase, they are in transition: separated from their former condition and identity but not yet anchored in a new one; they are in limbo. In this transitional stage, normal structures fall away. New ideas and forces can be born here and changes are initiated. when in the third phase they return to their everyday life, they bring the incorporated change with them.

(Jean Tee, Jennifer Tee in Tana Toraja. *Op weg naar de tussenstaat*, [www.teeteetee.nl/tekst\\_toraja.html](http://www.teeteetee.nl/tekst_toraja.html))

[www.teeteetee.nl](http://www.teeteetee.nl)

Jennifer Tee,  
*Aiming at the Past*. 2009.  
C-pint on Dibond,  
59 x 86 cm, Editie 7. Cour-  
tesy Galerie Fons Welters.

