

## **An Interview with Caroline Byrne**

Carolyn Brine, April 8th, 2014

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**Carolyn Brine: Hello Caroline, wow, it is fantastic to finally meet up! By the way you look great and I love your hair- it looks freshly washed and brushed! And I love everything you are wearing even your shoes which is funny because I heard you are not really a “shoe person” and may actually have a rare disorder where you are not able to visualize an ensemble below the knee. How are you doing!?**

Caroline Byrne: Look, I'm glad you wanted to do this interview, but can we just start already? I don't have much time.

**Of course! Well, we might as well begin by talking about your artwork. It is so fascinating. You must have to explain yourself all the time, does that get tiring?**

Well no, honestly I don't think people talk about it all that much. There was just a short window, two years to be precise, when I was in graduate school. To be extremely precise it was less than two years because a school year isn't a full year, and to be extremely clear at that time people talked about it because they had no choice. I mean, what I am saying isn't entirely true- there have been a few isolated moments here and there, and obviously I enjoy the freedom of being a nobody but...a deadline because I got into a show or a residency or a grant or whatever wouldn't necessarily kill me.

**I find this unfortunate to believe and perhaps your modesty is clouding your judgement. BUT since you brought up the topic of graduate school- do you have anything new or interesting to add to the whole art, art school, graduate school, state of education generally, THAT conversation that is going on out there?**

No, not really. I will say, even though it may involve getting punched in the face by one or several of my colleagues the next time I see them, that it is inspiring people are putting their faith in something so immaterial. I mean to think we went from the housing bubble to all this in only a few short years, humans must be evolving quickly.

**Uhhh... Errr, that is certainly a way to look at it. Getting on with things, lets talk about main project, the delightful Proton Accel- I mean Photon Articulator. The Photon Articulator Museum and Gift Shop. It is such a complex and heady project: science, philosophy, what-have-you. You have what- been working on it off and on for 5 years yes?! Where do we even begin?**

*(sigh)* Where do we even begin? Where do we even begin. Hmm.... Well, for one I am trying to layer these different ways of experiencing time and space. I think a lot of artists and writers who do these types of projects would say something similar. A world...let's use our world for lack of a better example, is a complex matrix of singular perspectives. A geologist may look at time in chunks of hundreds of thousands of years, whereas an Olympic sprinter is depending on fractions of seconds. A mathematician may have the luxury of looking at space abstractly, an engineer not so much. A fashion designer would see the truth as something that should be plucked from the air before it hits the ground, while a lawyer would see the truth as something that needs to hit the ground before it can be proven that it will hit the ground. Perhaps most provoking, would be comparing someone like an atheistic physicist with a religious extremist; on one hand they are clearly these opposites but when it comes to being unusually fatalistic, and seeing this world as something small in this larger picture, they but up neatly to each other. I mean even if all that exists is space and time- that seems like **plenty** to work with. And by time I am of course also interested in this sort of steady and linear cultural evolution and (potential) devolution. I mean- even if you are a creationist fundamentalist person you can't deny that we are sitting in chairs, wearing clothing, and carrying computers in our pockets. This was not true for Adam and Eve.

**What I am hearing is that you are interested in everything except this perfect present moment where we can all come together and also feel one with the universe. I am joking of course but do you find there is something essentially reactionary about this project?**

I am not reactionary. I do feel there is too much emphasis on trying to connect and get along and not enough emphasis on learning how to agree to disagree. And maybe when we stop trying so hard we can connect to the universe, multiverse rather, on some other level? I think the universe, sorry- I mean to say multiverse, would be offended that we all use it as some sort of lame excuse to blandify the world. Does that make sense?

**Not entirely. Moving on, this is all interesting and the last thing I want to do is offend you, but when I think about The Photon Articulator I think about its pathetic juvenile quality; I mean it is like a very-very-very and to that I would add an additional really-really immature and egomaniacal person's fantasy- and that person is you. Some feel this makes it too self indulgent, pretentious possibly. And if it is not failing, it certainly seems to be concerned with failing in many respects. Do you agree?**

*(Long unpleasant silence) Are you serious? (sighs, puts face in hands for an unusually lengthy moment).*

The thing is, unfortunately, failure is NOT terribly interesting to me. Obviously, failure is an important part of creativity but everyone who has seen a TED talk knows this already. Failure is when you want a new sandwich flavor so you try on a different condiment and it doesn't taste quite right so then the next time you go to make a sandwich you take what you learned from that last experience and pick a better condiment. In a way, failure and creativity are one and the same.

**Right! This is what I am saying! This is EXACTLY how I feel about your art! It has this not-quite-right sandwich quality. And dare I say, it also lacks a certain meatiness.**

You realize you are talking to a fucking vegetarian, right? *(another silence- shorter but still uncomfortably long)* Well ok fine, FINE, let's say perhaps my artwork involves failure in some way. You should know that when I fail it is not intentional but is actually an accident caused by disorganization, laziness, procrastination, and my disastrous habit of working on tiny little things nobody notices until the very last minute when I realize I haven't started The Most Important Thing but the fact that I haven't started The Most Important Thing also falls under disorganization, laziness, and procrastination. I mean, my point is when I fail I do it with the utmost integrity; it is not just the shallow meaningless gesture du jour.

Anyhow, failure is the ground, we are all eventually going to fail. What is interesting possibly, I hope, is what is success? And how can you measure success? Does it need to be corroborated? If so then by how many people? This is not one of those questions where I secretly know the answer.

**Umm, sorry, but for the sake of clarity, how is your work successful exactly?**

Seriously!? OK, I know you are just trying to provoke me at this point so I am going to do the breathing exercises I learned for these types of situations. *(exaggerated breathing noises for 2 minutes)*

Listen. I never said my work was successful, I am talking about success as a concept that I think about through the the various glistening loops of the Photon Articulator. Try to follow me for a minute ok?

I think, I hope, there is this increasing awareness that we are all here extremely temporarily and share the planet with 7+ billion other people, if it is even really possible for anyone to have that awareness? The Victorian approach of digging deeper into the earth and surrounding yourself with trinkets in a pathetic attempt to stave off mortality is, many people would agree, an impulse to resist- in fact it is trendy to resist it. But then there is this other extreme of wanting to be the exact opposite of this, which translates to more sophisticated consumers- the food is always take out and can immediately be thrown away, the electronics are always being traded up for the next better thing, lots of flying around- literally not clinging to one place. This amounts to huge amounts of out of sight and out of mind labor, energy, and pollution. But then we look at those pictures of smoggy China... And here the internet does help I think, minus, of course, the pollution the internet itself is creating. Our collective success as a species is literally crowding us out. Maybe it is the

hoarders who live with the most integrity in these times and it is our deep down awareness of this that makes everyone cringe.

I am not saying anything original here, I mean this re-evaluating success idea is ALL OVER the place. There is a column on Huffington Post called "Third Metric: Redefining Success Beyond Money and Power". Here you can read all about meditating your way to gratitude, learning how to say yes to no, hula hooping across the country for exercise awareness, or quitting your high paying job so you can start your own bees wax lib balm business or whatever. These are all good ideas, great ideas even, but it is also wise to take note when Google co-opts your co-opted Eastern religion, Dove/Unilever embraces your social practice, and a far away factory based petroleum oil based lip balm manages to copy your cutesy graphics. What does this personal success for the charmed entrepreneurial set ultimately mean for the majority of the population? Perhaps nothing and I am simply jealous but it is something to think about.

Coming back to the Articulator for a moment, it is unclear whether this Caroline Byrne character of Photon Articulator fame is a successful scientist/inventor person in the long ago past, was a minor historical footnote in any past, or is neither of these things and is, in the unglamorous present, just an eccentric with some sort of personality disorder which involves illusions of grandeur. I am talking about different degrees of success. Because being a craftily industrious personality disordered eccentric IS a success, it is just not nearly as successful as being a super famous scientist. My point is, nobody is less impressed with your handmade potholder than I am, but it is a success, a +1 ugly potholder in the world. This is what I am talking about. So, overstate my case, embracing failure just doesn't seem like the answer because it avoids the very real problem of success. But again, that doesn't mean that failure won't happen naturally- In fact some of us have a real knack for it.

### **Now I am being reminded of how amazingly humble you are**

*(Eyes roll)* You know I can't ever tell if you are being earnest or sarcastic. But this is reminding me... One thing I am seeing a lot is artists saying "I'm just making this for my friends." There are just so many people making art, so many people taking art seriously, that all these people are rethinking what success is for an artist. We can't all be famous. Not that we aren't all desperate to be validated but there does seem to be some awareness that this may not happen in a dramatic fashion. Today, when people say things like "you could be famous!" or "so and so will make it!" this not only sounds far fetched and ridiculous, it sounds dated. So this "making this for my friends" business does seem to be some sort of form of resigned-humble-make your own success-model for living story and one way to cope with the existenti-*(cut off by C. Brine)*

**Well, this is something. Maybe? I am sure all of your colleagues are not as good at mastering failure as you are, and may also not be as creative in dreaming up a new success that bears a remarkable resemblance to failure. Anyhow, do you worry you are giving your secrets away by having this conversation with me? What if people are bored by The Articulator now that they know everything about it? And do you feel that you spend too much time thinking about your artwork while not actually working on your art?**

No. By that I mean I have no secrets, or on second thought I must have some secrets but they are not relevant. The thing is the Photon Articulator Museum lives in its day to day life in whatever iteration is being admired at that moment. For better and worse, it really is independent of anything I say about it, not unlike a wayward child.

And listen, I am ignoring that last question because I feel it is slightly hostile. However, I will say this: I do think that if people spent more time just sitting absolutely still the world would be a much less offensive place and Mom Nature would probably not be waving her middle fingers around frantically. I mean, you build a world and then you have to live in it.

**OK, well let's get back to something people have said about your work; that it is "self indulgent." Of course, some people think of that as an insult, but I find it refreshing in this pre-teen angsty of way.**

People can say that, I don't care; and I don't care because I don't really know what "being self indulgent" actually means. I will give you my definition though which may be slightly different than yours. I mean have you read Gulliver's Travels lately? Or Don Quixote? They are worth checking out. I recently realized I was part of this whole is it real or not real/meta/clever boy/ironic art genre- I guess the fact that The Articulator has a science theme and it is set in near but critically distanced future was partly to blame. Anyway, the thing about some of this stuff is that it appears, on the surface, to be too self indulgent but in fact it is not nearly self indulgent enough. It often just feels dry and boring but there are lots of wonderful exceptions of course... Anyway, If you want, you can draw a line from clever boy art to Jorge Luis Borges- at least if you follow the literature track instead of the visual art one. And Borges is really wonderful, but he is not GREAT like Cervantes who basically created this genre. He was fairly obsessed and inspired by Cervantes and I am sure he would be happy to simply be in this sentence with him. But what is great about Don Quixote is everything that Borges, as an elegant craftsman, leaves out of his writing- the goofy puns, the bathroom humor, the dull everyday repetitiveness, the senseless violence. It is as if the tale swoops down to pick the reader up before heading off into more cerebral territory.

And then there is Gulliver's Travels; Jonathan Swift was a huge human right activist but he could still write a scene where Gulliver, as a giant in Lilliput, urinates all over a Palace to put out a fire. I mean it is possible to be deeply and ridiculously self indulgent and have a more collective awareness simultaneously, that is what I am saying. This is humanism. Or humanity, or umm whatever- but you know what I'm talking about. The fact that this even looks like a paradox is tied in with our increasingly simplistic and polarized understanding of reality.

**You realize these books are about failure in a sense. But, changing the subject slightly, don't you feel like we live in this society where it is ok for white men to be really self indulgent but it is less ok for everyone else? Like everything else looks like some sort of "other"?**

This is not what I want to be talking about right now, and no and yes, or... In a way this is what I was just talking about. I think having all this history- all these printed words and images on your side telling you people who look and talk like you are basically the main people who exist is both good and bad; it can make it harder to go deep because you have this crutch, but logistically your work is much more likely to be supported. Colonial appropriations, or wink wink references to stuff you think is hip or whatever is not really self indulgence, if anything it is the opposite. Think about it, one is quite literally not connecting with the self.

**Well one could argue that this is about communication- you know, communication with history or with themes you enjoy, or simply communication with other people who you think will view the work. In any case, I feel like you are being a bit of a hypocrite, considering how much you seem to worship Don Quixote.**

Right, but is this a satisfying form of communication? And I am not saying we shouldn't be interested in all of history, I am saying we should somehow be slightly more conscious of how we are situating ourselves within it. And, if you are going to be conscious, why not be heavy handed and didactic about it so there is no miscommunication. I mean, your art object may be about the earth being swallowed up by the ocean but the powers that be will simply acknowledge the pretty blue blob against the pretty green streaks and that will end up on some Victoria's Secret bra. I think artists, and people generally should be careful about throwing all irony out the window rather than contribute naively to the blandification of the world. Ironically, it is popular to believe that irony itself is contributing to the blandification of the world. This is not true of course but when your poles of earnestness and irony are a fine craft beer on the one hand and a PBR on the other, there is simply not much room to maneuver in that tiny 12oz box. What I am saying is why not consider the actual real box, which could be as large as multiple universes?

*(Sigh)* It can be useful to think of science as a parallel, because science is naive in a way with its neutral curiosity- so much of the good and bad in the world has come from this naive curiosity. Scientists do speak out sometimes, global warming is a big one lately- unfortunately it is a pretty big deal. The thing to remember here is that is not their job to speak out, it is their job to do science. But some of them do it anyways. So what should we all do anyways? Maybe it is an artist's responsibility these days to co-opt themselves, or try to work

with more benevolent forces, or try to shut down malevolent ones, or try to set a thoughtful example in their other work or personal lives, or whatever. Basically get over art enough as a whole to look at it critically. Assume, for a moment, that making an artistic protest sign might be bad art, but it could be a great protest sign and worth doing anyways. I am NOT saying everyone I know including myself should drop their amazing masterpieces and start making hyper literal political art. In fact, I am even going against these contemporary social art/life hybrid practices that are so magnanimous. Instead, I think I am trying to pull together this somewhat counterintuitive idea of self indulgence as a step towards humility, an awareness of self in this larger picture, and an alternative to this idea that we should be speaking across this void in some vain attempt to have other voices meet our voices in this empty space...

Who knows maybe the cutting edge physicists will prove this two feet void between us is actually an illusion and instead reality is more as if a slice of your brain is pushed up against a slice of my brain. OK, this is a terrible example considering these circumstances... But... And this all may sound far out but I'm basically just getting back to a slightly outmoded or at least less institutional idea of the function of art-*(Beep noise, then long pause as Caroline Byrne reaches into her cluttered pocketbook to search for her cell phone, and then stares at her phone blankly as if forgetting where she is)*

**I see you are checking your phone. You said earlier you “don’t have much time.” Perhaps with a little focus and mindfulness we can finish this promptly.**

Well, contrary to popular belief, I am even more in the moment and my mind is extremely full now that I am talking with you, sending flirtatious little messages into cyberspace, and reading the latest posts on Facebook about art, art school, graduate school, and the state of education generally.

I think what your problem is, well one of your problems, is that you are a bit of a localist. Not to sound preachy but it sounds like you need to read up on quantum entanglement, probability waves, the uncertainty principle-that sort of thing. This is all very old news. I don't need to bore my delicate readership with things they already know but I can certainly give you some book recommendations. If anything, and again this is just my humble opinion, the www world is closing the gap between this illusion of the world where everything is local and the real world where everything is not local. Or it may be local- but that locality is still wildly different from your incredibly naive understanding of it. I will concede that putting the local on top of the stimuli hierarchy is a great way to not get hit by a car, and I imagine Shrodinger would agree with me here. Ha!

**OK well, I guess I don't know much about quantum mechanics, but I think YOU are being a little naive, dare I say irrational when you think something like the internet, which is dependent on data traveling in a normal though quite impressive travel speed sort of way is the same as something that happens instantaneously- irrespective of speed. I am implying that this is a stretch- even for you. If you really wanted to find some sort of symmetry between the very small and the human life size I feel like there are more likely places to look, maybe twin studies-that sort of thing, even archetypes.**

What?! Maybe, I can't think about this right now. How far off topic do we need to get? And frankly, I can't be held responsible for everything I say when I am having a frantic day like today, and am also tired and need to eat something. *(long sigh)* If you feel like the problem is I am not being respectful enough by not paying more attention to you I wish you would just say that rather than dance around the whole issue passive aggressively. On that note, I really do need to leave soon!

**Oh no! We have so much more to talk about! I feel like we barely talked about anything. Maybe we can do this again?**

Uhhhhh, possibly, I can't promise anything these next few weeks are quite hectic. I really need to spend some time looking at my calendar, and even that will take a considerable amount of time.

**Can I ask one more question for now?- It is really personal but I am so curious.**

I guess I shouldn't be surprised you knew that one of my pet peeves is someone asking a question to ask a question. Go ahead.

**Ok, well why did you choose to make my name a pseudonym, instead of using your same name. I mean you used your real name in the Photon Articulator project, when most “normal” people would have used a pseudonym.**

Well, mostly I feel like I don't want to confuse my readers, they are smart, but are they smart in that way? Although, on the other hand, the **bolded** type may have been enough to differentiate us. I also just like the name Carolyn Brine, but only for a pen name. It just seems like a good moniker for a bitter critic, or a hard hitting journalist- not that you really fall into either of THOSE categories.

**But... I... We...**

Wow- look at that time, it stops for no-one! I have to go! This was neat! (*pulls jacket on and runs out quickly*)

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*Sketchy bibliography but I am trying for the sake of Carolyn Brine's education...*

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