



Into the Woods: Brody Condon

ED HALTER

Some visitors to the 10th Sonsbeek International Sculpture Exhibition would have stumbled onto something rather unusual during the summer of 2008. Strolling through the Dutch city of Arnhem's 160-acre Sonsbeek Park, filled annually with large-scale sculptures and installations for the event, viewers might have glimpsed ragtag bands of men and women, dressed in outfits reminiscent of *The Road Warrior*, gathered in groups around the sculptures, engaged in what would have looked like arcane rituals or fierce duels.

These post-apocalyptic tribes were in fact part of the exhibition: a session of live-action role-playing, or *larping*, staged by American artist Brody Condon under the title *SonsbeekLive: The TwentyfiveFold Manifestation*. Larping is a quasi-theatrical, improvisatory practice developed more than two decades ago by fans of pen-and-paper fantasy role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons*. For *SonsbeekLive*, Condon worked with Danish live role-playing game developer Bjarke Pedersen to create a scenario for European larpers to play out in the park during

the sculpture exhibition. Set in a far future world, the game posited that the sculptures were physical representatives of immortal god-like beings; each group of larpers determined for themselves what rituals they would undertake before the sculptures. "The larp will be seen as a work of live public art by the thousands of viewers who will visit the park during the summer," Condon and Pedersen wrote in a players' guide. "Normally we do not have outside viewers watching us play, but here it is our goal to integrate this element into the event in such a way that does not interrupt game flow."

Condon has worked with permutations of gaming and performance for years, inspired by the work of figures like Ann Hamilton and video's first decade of studio tapes, reconsidered for the digital age. In an early work, *Adam Killer* (1999–2001), Condon built a series of doppelgangers of his friend Adam within a customizable video game, shooting them over and over again. Created collaboratively with other members of the collective C-Level, *Waco Resurrection* (2003) is a computer game in which players take the role of David Koresh, fighting off government agents with powers from God. For *Death Animations* (2006), Condon brought actors dressed in medieval gear into a gallery, where they imitated the looping gestures given to bodies in video games after characters have died.



Condon recently sat down to discuss *SonsbeekLive* and an upcoming project: *Case*, a live stage adaptation of William Gibson's cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*.

HALTER: Why were you drawn to working with larpers for *Sonsbeek*?

CONDON: There's a progressive Nordic European larping scene that has been around for years in Scandinavia. In 1999, these groups in Copenhagen and Sweden created the Larp Manifesto, based on Lars Von Trier's Dogme 95 manifesto, saying, we don't want simulation. That means if you hit somebody you really hit them; if you have sex with someone, you really have sex with them. So it's like—let's rent a house, put 30 people in there, and pretend we're a 1970s commune. They found a dry-docked Russian submarine from the 1960s, so they got authentic Russian navy uniforms, lived on the sub for three days, wired it with some electronics and had some kind of drama play out naturally. I spent a few years getting in touch with the larp community, trying to find a way to work with them that wasn't just taking the visual style and making a video or something like that.

What kind of scenario did you provide for the players?

We built a 40-foot high tower that they lived in for three days at a time. We provided a very basic live game mechanics structure. They built their own backgrounds for their own characters; they lived in character for three days. The point was to create this outer structure based on the Nordic style that spit out random performances and rituals around the objects. It was the perfect situation for me not to just recontextualize the larpers in an art exhibition, but to do a double recontextualization, to take over all the other artists' works.

How did the players interact with regular park attendees?

That was the difficult thing for me—how to make these two separate spaces, two mind-sets interface seamlessly without breaking each other, because there's an inherent performance structure that an art viewer at a public exhibition follows. What we realized was that we could manipulate that, because it has a set of rules. So we told the players that the whole park was an alternative plane of existence, and the art viewers were ghosts in a kind of purgatory.

The most dynamic thing that would happen is that art viewers would come to the tower, because it's the core thing that you could see, so players would switch off guarding it. I left these mirrors around, not knowing what they would do with them. The players kept breaking them, then picking up the pieces and pointing them at viewers who were constantly trying to get in. They had no idea what was going on because I didn't want the viewers to understand anything about the back-story.

We had an incredibly interactive piece on both sides, and at no point did we have to tell the viewers that they were playing a game. What I like about it so much is that there is no "true viewer" and each group gets a different experience. It's like I made three different pieces—I made a piece for the players, I made a piece for the audience, and I made a piece for people to see later, to talk about like we're talking about it. The trick is making all these pieces somehow function simultaneously together.



ABOVE LEFT: Brody Condon. BELOW LEFT and ABOVE: Documentation from Condon's event, *SonsbeekLive: The Twentyfivefold Manifestation*, in Arnhem, Denmark, 2008.

Now you're readying *Case*, which you're staging in a red-barn theater in a Missouri town.

A lot of the actors are from the community theater in the area or recovering addicts. The book itself is about addiction and transcendence. The play itself will be six hours—viewers can come in and leave when they want—more like a reading with sculptural props, a live electronic musician, and a gamelan orchestra that kicks in later during the hallucination scenes, when he's in cyberspace. The design's somewhere between early 1990s computer-generated imagery like *Lawnmower Man* and Bauhaus. It's interactive in the sense that things will be happening in different spaces. People wander around, choose the space they want to look at.

I really consider these things temporary little communes: Everybody that comes has some kind of involvement. It's different than a public sculpture—it gives people an attachment to something they're coming to see. It's beyond game design—it's just trying to figure out what people will do in certain situations.

ED HALTER is a critic and curator living in Brooklyn, New York. His writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *The Believer*, *The Village Voice*, and elsewhere, and he is a founder and director of *Light Industry*, a venue for film and electronic art.