

Tiny Movements JOHANNA BILLING

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art Saturday 15 August – Sunday 27 September 2009



Johanna Billing

Born in 1973 in Jonkoping, Sweden, Johanna Billing lives and works in Stockholm.

From 1994 to 1999 Billing attended the Konstfack International College of Arts, Crafts and Design, Stockholm.

Johanna Billing works in a variety of media including public interventions, performance, music, video, books and internet interactions. She is interested in atmospheres that can be created with sound and images, often triggered by the question, 'How do we want to live?'.

Billing has exhibited broadly. Recent major solo exhibitions include: I'm Lost Without Your Rhythm, Camden Arts Centre, London (2009); Taking Turns, Kemper Museum, Kansas City; This is How We Walk On The Moon, Malmö Konsthall, Malmö (both 2008); Forever Changes, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel and Keep on Doing, Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee (both 2007). She has participated in survey shows such as Documenta 12, Kassel (2007); Singapore Biennale (2006), 9th Istanbul Biennial; 1st Moscow Biennale (both 2005) and 50th Venice Biennale (2003).

Johanna also runs the record label 'Make it Happen' with her brother Anders, publishing music and arranging live performances.

Cover:
Johanna Billing
Magic & Loss, 2005 (production still)
16.52 min/loop, 16 mm film transferred to DVD

"Often I think I am after a way of communicating — sometimes perhaps with oneself — that we have lost contact with."

Johanna Billing, Iasi, October 2008 'I'm Lost Without Your Rhythm', Bruce Haines, Camden Arts Centre, page 5. Published to accompany the exhibition Johanna Billing: I'm Lost Without Your Rhythm at Camden Arts Centre 10 July – 13 September 2009











Johanna Billing production stills from the making of various films.

Artist background

Johanna Billing's decision to study art came about as a result of her realisation that art allowed her to cover everything she was interested in, which included music, history, social sciences and philosophy.

Her earlier work mainly consisted of sculptures and drawings of the figure. The turning point for her practice resulted from her first 'social' project at art school. For this project Billing photographically recorded discussion sessions in which class members were invited to view her work and ask questions about what she was doing. This came about as a result of her frustration with the lack of assistance given by her lecturers and her desire for their support. After exhibiting the photographs, titled *What I really want to do*, she realised that the images were not only more meaningful to her but that the idea and the images were also interesting to others too.

Billing's final work for her own graduate exhibition at university, recorded class members learning and performing a collective dance. This work explored the everpresent individual pressures and anxiety of final year students through a collective format.

This work was developed as a result of Billing's desire to comment on her feelings about choosing what appeared to be an egocentric, individualistic career path as an artist. However, after leaving university, Billing became aware that society's values and ideals had shifted from previously being more 'collective', to being much more 'individualistic'. Her generation were really only mirroring the behaviour of what she saw as being a changed society.

Ideas and inspiration

Johanna Billing's ideas strongly relate to Swedan's Social Democratic period of conformist 'collective' thoughts of the 1960's and 70's and the contrast to her own more 'individualistic' generation.

Her work often has a musical connection, focusing on the performance of songs and how they capture memory and moment. The dynamics of the group or 'collective actions' and the relationship of the individual within the group, is often a commentary on political and cultural climates.

These group scenarios reflect on routine, rehearsal and ritual, with an emphasis on the fragility of individual performance and power of 'collective experience'. The emotional charge in her work is derived from tensions which we keep within, and shifts of focus between the individuals portrayed and the overall societal backdrop. These multi-layered interpretations oscillate somewhere between documentary and fiction.

However, unlike many artists, Billing isn't interested in working with community groups. Instead, groups are used as a means of exploring individual behaviour. In her works individuals will not have had any previous links to the artist, each other or the situation, for instance, being part of the same generation.

Her interests are also about hindsight and our inability to determine societal changes or transformations around us until well after they have happened.

Billing's work is seen as being romantic, yet unsentimental and not heroic.





Johanna Billing Production stills from the making of various films.

Video/Film/Music

Billing's films and videos are neither fictional nor real scenarios. They intentionally set up a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty, often with groups of people and about experiences that she explains, would be difficult to put into words. Music titles are often used as the title of her films, triggering and layering other meanings and relationships. Music also allows a universal entry point for the viewer, with the ability to communicate and connect to the broader world.

The 'collective actions' which Billing creates, seem unfamiliar, uncertain and open-ended, and happen in a type of 'no man's land', where no-one seems to know quite what to do. Billing's use of a group or collective, reflects the societal trends and methodologies of her parent's generation of the 1960s and 1970s; a time of great social and political change and of a more organised society of 'collective thought'. While individuals are briefed on her ideas prior to the event, people improvise within staged, concentrated situations and either sing or remain mute. With the absence of a dialogue, a particular type of atmosphere is built up, with the viewer only able to read the changing gestures of the people involved.

The edginess of the people involved in Billing's scenarios comes across as a result of people's uncertainty in an environment they are unfamiliar with and doing something that they wouldn't ordinarily do. For Billing, it is the sense of uncertainty that says a lot about people and, as a result, the viewer is presented with a range of feelings of uneasiness, fear or joy and asked to question their situation.

The films are intentionally looped to create an ongoing continuum of events. This build feelings of restlessness - collapsing time into space and intensifying the feelings for the viewer, in particular the endless frustration of no fixed beginning or end. Hours of footage may be filmed and edited which often relate to melancholy and loss - feelings which Billing explains, people often suppress and lose touch with.

While the audience is not a part of Billings work, 'audience' is a strong consideration and of interest to her. In the past she has created work that acts as a catalyst for discussion on local issues in Sweden. Now working and showing her work in other countries, Billing considers her films as aiding discussion in quite a different context, and is aware that the work will be viewed and discussed quite differently. In moving away from local ideas and issues, Billing's main concerns are how to retain her own connections and history, while embracing the stories of different cultures with a more developed depth of knowledge.









Johanna Billing *Project for a revolution*, 2000 (production stills) DVD 03:14/loop

project for a revolution

Project for a Revolution (2000), is inspired by Michelangelo Antonioni's film (a screen flop), called Zabriskie Point (1970).

This work shows a group of young students passively taking part in something that recalls a university 'sit-in'. The ennui demonstrated in the film is in direct contrast to the revolutionary fervour of *Zabriskie Point*. Here the students wait for a political rally to start. Photocopied pamphlets are blank. A common cause seems to be missing. Nothing happens. There is no visible agenda. People stand aimlessly.

With a distinct lack of nostalgia or moralism, in this work Billing reflects her disbelief at being unable to create a sense of community or 'collective action' within the group, in contrast to the Sweden of the 1960s and 70s. Instead, she portrays a sense of skepticism and distrust with these young people, of the new generation, who are more individualistic in their behaviour.

With a late 1960's aesthetic, the work explores a time when attempts to change society were made throughrevolutionary acts against the system and change was demanded in a collective manner, such as, group marches or protests. Billing's interests here relate to the next generation and to social change - aware of the fact that her generation is now reaping the benefits of the direct actions made by the her parent's generation.

Billing is also interested in the way her peers have a desire to work hard and achieve and, as a consequence, are much more individualistic. They are anxious and don't possess a collective sense of community. Hence, she also sees this work as reflecting something not functioning in ourselves and about what happens in society itself when an overarching feeling of listlessness leads others to act in a similar way.

While the idea of 'revolution' commonly relates to a circumstance that is of some urgency and builds to some sort of action, the looped nature of the work, makes us unsure as to what is happening, or has happened. People are sitting and waiting, while one guy comes and goes. The whole feeling is circular and ongoing, yet frustratingly inactive. Here, the looped inactivity questions the possibilities for social engagement, protest and revolt in contemporary culture.



Johanna Billing You don't love me yet, 2003 (production stills) DVD 07:43

you don't love me yet

The work, You Don't Love Me Yet (touring since 2002) brings together Billing's interest in music, art and community.

The You Don't Love Me Yet project invites local musicians of diverse genres to come together on one night to perform their own cover version of the song This event has now taken place in over 20 cities across the world, with more than 200 versions of the song performed. The archival documentation of the ongoing You Don't Love Me Yet project, includes 200 versions of the song, which was originally published by Roky Erickson in 1984.

The You Don't Love Me Yet project was originally initiated by Index (the Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation) and NIFCA (Nordic Institution for Contemporary Art) in 2002. The project then toured in The Netherlands as part of the series of performance festivals called, 'If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution', with live events in Utrecht.

The project started when Billing happened to hear Roky Erickson's song being sung and liked its ambiguous lyrics and meaning – hopeful yet disillusioned. The song prompted thoughts of relationships – of love and loss, feminism and the desire for independence for young women.

While the playing of the 'cover' version is seen as paying tribute to another artist, a new interpretation is also a test of the artists' ability to maintain his or her identity. Here also, in working with music and art, Billing redefines 'the cover' seeing music as being parallel and equal to art, as opposed to music being an accompaniment. In using local and unsigned or emerging bands, Billing also symbolically links the lyrics back to the 'unseen' and the desire to be visible and wanted.

In Melbourne, the event was arranged in partnership with artist/musician Marco Fusinato and his ongoing *You Don't Have to Call it Music* series. Held at The Toff, the event featured local musicians including the Melbourne Ukelele Kollective, Henry Wagons, Beaches, Sophie Brous all performing their own cover version of Erickson's ambiguous rock ballad.

Parallel to all of the performances, Billing creates a DVD with the same title. The video is filmed with friends and members of various bands, who come together in a studio to record the song. The choir of singers present a feeling of melancholy; evoking memories of staged benefit concerts such as Band Aid (1984) and the song 'Do They Know It's Christmas', which was sung with such intense solidarity. The ongoing You Don't Love Me Yet project is seen by Billing as a catalyst to explore ways of maintaining originality and uniqueness on an individual and collective level.

The project could have been stopped but now has a life of its own, being staged over and over again, just as music and theatre tend to. This is directly opposed to and against the art norm, where the more a work is copied, the less valuable it is.





Johanna Billing Where she is at, 2001 (video stills) DVD 07:35/loop

where she is at

Where She Is At was filmed at the Ingierstrand baths outside Oslo, Norway in 2001.

In the film, a woman's inner struggle on a diving tower is brought together with the fate of a recreational facility threatened with closure. Will she dare to jump? Will the baths be closed? Will today's Norway take the step and leave the old ideas of fresh air and recreation for all behind? As the film is looped, we are forced to follow the protagonists painful hesitance, over and over again.

Billing was taken to the Ingierstrand baths by a friend. The complex was built in the 1930s, at a time when Norway provided and promoted good health for its citizens through outdoor heath centres like this one. During a visit to the centre, Billing captured a young woman on the diving tower who walked out to the end of the board, hesitated and didn't jump straight away. As opposed to the frustrated and disgruntled onlookers, Billing empathised with the woman, sensing her hesitation and desire to dive only when she felt ready.

In this work, Billing expresses common views held within society surrounding our freedom to do what we want and competing underlying societal pressures to perform and achieve. While the woman did eventually jump, it was the response to her hesitation that led Billing to think that if she hadn't she would have been seen to have failed. This relates to the notion of 'achievement' and broader societal pressures in our lives.

Interestingly, the side view of the tower, forms an 'F', which became symbolic to Billing of the old functionalist, modernist ideas that are fast becoming obsolete.











magical world

Magical World, 2005 is inspired by the American song of the same name, originally sung by Minnie Riperton and the band Rotary Connection in 1968. The band was one of the first mixed race groups of the 1960s and played 'psychadelic rock'. The song is sad, yet strong and cocky.

Recorded in Zagreb, Croatia in 2005, *Magical World* shows a children's orchestra rehearsing Rotary Connection's song. The camera moves between the music room and the worn surroundings of the cultural centre outside Zagreb, whose hurry to adapt to the rest of westernised Europe threatens its own culture. In newly learned English, a young Croatian boy sings the enigmatic and defiant first lines; "Why do you want to wake me from such a beautiful dream?...can't you see that I am sleeping?... We live in a Magical World..."

Billing's idea for this work began after being invited to be part of a project called 'Normalization'. Since 2004, the Croatian curatorial collective, called What, How, and for Whom (WHW) has been developing projects that investigate various aspects of normalization, or rather, the ideology of normalization that has been sweeping Europe since the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. The notion of normalization has an interesting political history and has been used by both socialist and liberal authorities at various times and in different contexts to describe nations that are in transition toward a certain defined norm. Using different formats, these projects have been aimed at revealing false universal thought behind the whole process of normalization. The debate for Croatia is whether absorption into the European Union (EU) will be a positive one.

Following the Yugoslav wars (1991-95), the rapid overnight change to independence in 2001, and recent steps towards becoming a member of the EU, Croatia has been through a period of extreme change. Further, after starting to recover and relearn their own language, the population now find themselves being forced to learn English. This combination of social, economic and political changes triggered the idea for Billing's work.

The editing of *Magical World* is similar to a rock music video, with pans and close ups of the perplexed, wide-eyed young faces as they concentrate and cope with the pressure of singing the song in English. The run down cultural centre in the background, built during a period of prosperity and abandoned by the architect in the 1980's after war broke out, is also a symbol of change, obsolescence and unfulfilled dreams. Billing sees the work as also being about the demise of recording distribution networks in the music industry during this time of change, and the displacing of musicians and producers. Her interest here too is in the idea of expressing something personal, in one's own voice, in the midst of loss, adjustment and rapid change.









Johanna Billing Missing out, 2001 (production stills) DVD 03.14/loop



missing out

Missing Out (2001) features a group of people who lie on the floor within a vast space. This activity illustrates the breathing exercises taught to Swedish children at kindergarten in the 1970s whereby the children breathed in unison. As was the case for Billing and her generation, this activity was imposed to create a sense of calm and social cohesion. However, in the work, while the majority conform amidst twitches and shuffling, one person disturbs the balance by standing up and then leaving, visibly annoyed by the state of forced harmony.

In an unsettling experience of whats on the one hand, seems restful, and on the other hand edgy, the work relates to Billing's own childhood memories of this 'collective experience'. In particular, Billing's memory is of the pressure to achieve and of being singled out as being better at breathing, outdoing her classmates. In this way, the experience is marred by the expectation of 'performance' or achievement, pitched against her peers.

As Billing sees it, the pressures of performance, achievement and this learned model, feeds into the way we live life as adults, causing undue stress and anxiety.





Johanna Billing Magic & Loss, 2005 (video stills) 16.52/loop, 16 mm film transferred to DVD

magic & loss

In the work *Magic & Loss* (2005) a group of people gather outside an apartment in Amsterdam and are invited to pack the belongings of an unknown person in a pleasantly furnished single household. A slow methodical silent choreography develops in their filling of cartons and hoisting furniture down to the street. In these strangers' mechanical handling of someone's personal belongings, a number of questions and associations about the absent occupier of the flat present themselves. The work is slow and repetitive but carefully organised. It isn't clear why the house is abandoned nor its relationship to the buying and selling of property.

The work is multi layered but was first inspired by the tragic sinking of 'The Estonia' in 1994 off Sweden's coast. The passenger ferry, which crossed The Baltic sea daily between Tallinn and Stockholm, was run by the Estonians and was a symbol of independence and the free world following the fall of Stalin. During a crossing in September 1994, with stormy high seas and an inexperienced captain, 850 people died and only 137 survivors. It was a national tragedy.

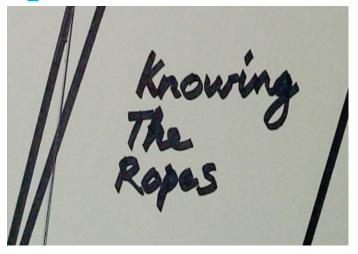
Marking 10 years since the Estonian sank – one of the biggest collective disasters to affect Sweden, in which whole families and communities were lost; Billing was invited to be a part of an exhibition 'On Disappearance'. As a result, Billing started to think about the way in which total strangers would have packed up the personal belongings of people after they had died and how terrible that would be. While the exhibition was never realised, because the tragedy was still too difficult for so may people to come to terms with, Billing kept the idea in her mind.

When the exhibition was cancelled Billing was in Amsterdam where they still use hooks, ropes, pulleys and ladders to hoist furniture and objects through the windows, out of and into apartments. The objects are seen regularly suspended high overhead and across the streets. Billing then started to think about her earlier ideas for the 'On Disappearance' project and the ways in which people's personal possessions became public objects in the streets. The transferal of objects backwards and forwards, and the 'hook' used to hoist the objects and the furniture, was also of interest to Billing who considered the actions as being a strong metaphor for economic resilience and productivity.

Consequently, Billing decided to complete the work in Amsterdam with people who didn't know each other, had no relationship to the owner of the apartment and were unaware that the furniture was 'actually' being moved. People with no familiarity to the objects or in packing up a stranger's place, all added a sense of responsibility and tension to the work. At the same time, it was poignant that Billing was actually assisting with packing and moving a deceased relative's estate.

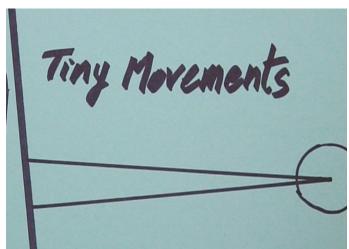
The relationship between packing, the person and the object was of particular interest to her as was the relationship to packing and moving objects in galleries and museums.

The title of the work refers to an album by Lou Reed, recorded in 1992 at a time when the musician Reed was dealing with the loss of loved ones. Coupled with the soundtrack and the sense of tension, the title creates a deep sense of melancholy and loss for the viewer.





Johanna Billing
This is how we walk on the moon
(production and video stills), 2007
DVD 27.00/loop



this is how we walk on the moon

As with her other works, Billing's work, *This is how we walk on the moon* reflects Billing's interest in the individual and placing people in situations of extreme concentration.

This is how we walk on the moon is a video created in cooperation with Edinburgh's Collective Gallery. The work was also part of the Project 1 Mile – meaning the work had to be created in a one mile radius from the Collective Gallery.

This is how we walk on the moon is inspired by Billing often having heard songs by local Edinburgh musicians who sang about sailing and the sea. For her project she decided, to select musicians who sang and wrote about the sea but had never experienced sailing first hand.

Consequently, we see a group of musicians working together to coordinate the sailing of the boat set to the sound track, "This is how we walk on the moon." This 1980's song is by experimental New York-based musician Arthur Russell. Billing created a cover of this song, arranging her own composition using string instruments.

The film's exploration and emphasis on learning as a group, collaboratively, gives weight to this actual event at sea. The mournful and abstract cello increases the sense of tension and inexperience of these novice sailors. Close up shots of each of the members faces, increases our sense of their concentration as they attempt to keep the boat safely on track.

The benches, created for to view the work, intentionally mirror the sails and the type of hard upright style of seating on the sailing boat.

In the work, Billing oscillates between foreground and background, together with close-ups of certailn individuals, implying continual movement between the individual and the group.

VICTORIAN ESSENTIAL LEARNING STANDARDS

The Arts, Level 6, Music, Creating and Making

Independently and collaboratively, they apply their knowledge and understanding to design, create and produce arts works influenced by the style of particular artists or cultures.

In the work You Don't Love Me Yet (2002 - 09) Billing has filmed musicians all over the world performing covers to this song from the 1980's singer and songwriter Roky Erickson. Billing was drawn to the lyrics and title because of the sense of ambivalence they evoke. Billing was also interested in how different performers could take someone else's song and make it their own.

As a class listen to Roky Erickson's You Don't Love Me Yet.

Break into groups and within your groups come up with your own version or cover of this song.

You may like to use voices as a capella, or include instruments. Perform your songs for your classmates. Record each performance and then discuss or write about how each group approached their cover of the song differently.

Level 6, The Humanities, History

Students learn about key events, ideologies and social and cultural movement that have shaped the contemporary world

Johanna Billing's film work *Project for a revolution* (2000) shows a group of young people who appear to be waiting for something to happen. In one shot we see a photocopier churning out blank pamphlets.

Consider the title of the work. Billing is interested in making comparisons or comments on the changes in ideology from her parent's generation to today's contemporary youth.

What do you think the artist is saying about contemporary youth? What comment is she making about revolution?

VCE ART

Unit 1, Outcome 2, Art and Society

Identify and discuss the cultural contexts of art, the social functions of art, and the interpretation and presentation of social issues and/or themes in art with reference to selected artworks.

Unit 3, Outcome 2, Interpreting Art

Interpret different aspects of an artwork's meanings and messages and compare artworks through the application of interpretive frameworks.

Johanna Billing uses groups of people often singing or collaborating to express certain ideas or themes.

In her film work *Magical World* we see a children's orchestra and choir singing together. The backdrop of this

scene is Croatia and the half finished buildings that had been abandoned during the Croatian war of independence. In this work the artist is exploring the way music can express the personal and intimate in the midst of external turmoil and change.

Compare the way Billing has referenced political turmoil and war in this work in relation to past artists who have used political unrest as inspiration for their artwork. For example, look at the work of Abstract Expressionist Franz Marc's *Fate of the Animals* (1914) and compare this work to Billing's *Magical World* (2004).

Unit 3, Outcome 2, Interpreting Art Interpret different aspects of an artwork's meanings and messages and compare artworks through the application of interpretive frameworks.

Johanna Billing's You Don't Love Me Yet (2002 – 2009) and Where she is at (2001) both comment on women and the pressures and difficulties of being a woman in contemporary society.

In Where she is at we see a woman at the top of a very high diving board, in a state of indecision as she decides whether or not to jump.

The lyrics *You Don't Love Me Yet* are hopeful yet disillusioned and convey something of contemporary relationships.

How do both these works communicate the struggles of contemporary women? Do you think the experiences of women now differ to women of past generations? How?

VCE DRAMA

Unit 3, Outcome 1, Creating and presenting ensemble performance

Develop and present character/s within a non-naturalistic ensemble performance.

In Magic & Loss (2005) we see group of people packing up the belongings and house of a complete stranger. This work was influenced by the thought about packing up the belongings of a deceased person or people after Billing was invited to make work for the exhibition On Disappearance – a memorial exhibition for those lives lost when a ferry traveling between Estonia and Stockholm sank in 1994.

In the work *Magic & Loss*, consider how Billing sets up group activities and collaborations to communicate ideas.

As a class develop a performance that explores the idea of disappearance. Coordinate a group activity that reflects this theme and act it out.





Commentaries:

"I also think that whe trying to communicate and portray certain situations, feelings and atmospheres, sound becomes one of the most powerful tools available. I find that in working with sound and music, I manage to get closer to what I want to grasp. If you look at my silent fims thay are also about music in the way that the story is told and how the editing is structured according to specific rhythms in both sound and image."

Johanna Billing, Iasi, October 2008, 'I'm Lost Without Your Rhythm', Bruce Haines, Camden Arts Centre, page 5. Published to accompany the exhibition Johanna Billing: I'm Lost Without Your, Rhythm at Camden Arts Centre 10 July – 13 September 2009

"Billing was listening to this song on the radio as she was reading in the newspaper that Sweden has the greatest amount of single-dwelling homes in the world. Billing relates the impetus of this project to contemporary problems associated with Swedish identity, such as isolation and the institutionalized nature of Swedish social democracy, where consensus tends to be privileged over dissention. All the participants in Billing's video belong to her generation, a younger demographic that is often accused of indifference or apathy, in contrast to the previous generation that is seen as transforming the world during the 60's."

'Everyday I am Everyday', Kealy, S., *Johanna Billing: look behind us, a blue sky,* Kundstmuseum Basel, Museum fur Gegenwartskunst, Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2007.

Tiny Movements - List of works:

Project for a revolution, 2000 DVD 03.14/loop

Missing out, 2001 DVD 03.14/loop

Where she is at, 2001 DVD 07.35/loop

You don't love me yet, 2003 DVD 07.43/archival installation

Magic & Loss, 2005 16mm film transferred to DVD 16.52/loop

Magical World, 2005 DVD 06.12/loop

This is how we walk on the moon, 2007 DVD 27.00/loop

Further Research:

http://www.makeithappen.org/johannabilling.html http://www.hollybushgardens.co.uk/

















