

## Jonathan Monk:

The distance between my mother and my sister and *The Distance Between My Mother And My Sister*

By Adam Carr

After viewing an image of the work *The Distance Between My Mother And My Sister* (1998) by Jonathan Monk, the following questions were posed by my mother and sister – the questions serving as a generator for my text on the work of Monk.

My mother (in Chester, UK): What is Jonathan Monk's work about? Where is he coming from, as an artist, so to speak?

As I begin to formulate my answer I have already been at this position before: my computer crashed and the original data has somehow become irretrievable. I now begin rewriting the answer to this question as well as those posed below but I am failing to precisely recollect what I wrote initially. It is inevitable that this version of the text will always differ from the first version, and yet strangely these unfortunate circumstances could almost function as an analogy for one of Jonathan Monk's artistic imperatives: the recollection and reapplication of a particular moment in the past. However, whereas I am attempting to selvedge information established only a few days ago, Monk's search reaches further into the past: namely, to the unique strategies of conceptual art as (un)seen in the work of key artists who rose to prominence during the 1960's and 70's. When one looks closer into Monk's work, it becomes quickly apparent that his reinterpreting act of works synonymous with this period is not as straightforward as it might initially seem. One can observe how, although this does provide the main source of inspiration behind his work, it is in fact, infused with references he makes to his own personal history, biography and interests as well as everyday anecdotes.

My sister (in Barbados\*): What's happening in *The Distance Between My Mother And My Sister* (1998)? Where and why were the photographs taken for instance?

As the title of the work partially infers, the piece serves as a form of index that describes the geographical distance that separates Monk's mother to his sister. The work traces a journey made by the artist's mother from her house in Leicester, UK to that of his sister's in Buckinghamshire, UK, some 100 miles away, but via the avoidance of any major roads. Each time Monk's mother had to stop the car and consult the AA route planner for directions, she captured her whereabouts using a camera, thus generating the sequence of photographs displayed beside an information plaque, which lists the precise course of her journey. Over the course of viewing the body of photographs we see a house, a traffic light, a public house, some trees, the occasional truck and various other everyday sightings - all in all prove nothing out of usual and rather what one expects to accompany them on any car journey, even if the reason for its undertaking might well be out of ordinary. In essence, however, what we are really confronted with are the consequences, results and evidence emerging from a set of conditions that the artist sought to initiate.

My mother (in Chester, UK): What is the reasoning behind this artwork? Where did the artist's idea come from?

Functioning as part of a significant strategy in the artist's repertoire, this work stands in line with a form of homage paid throughout Monk's work to his conceptual forbears. Yet, at the same time, however, his work deviates from being purely occupied with a reverence for others. Instead, Monk delicately revisits and rewrites the original concepts belonging to those he shares a particular affinity with, tying together other chosen strategies and points of investigation, and thereby paving the way for his own uniquely shaped artistic markings. The appearance of *The Distance Between My Mother And My Sister* (1998) – and in part of the key idea behind it – does indeed have its historical precedents. Like much systematic based photography work synonymous with the birth of conceptual art, it's formal qualities bear the appearance of a sequential ordering – the sequence being generated by, and in some cases subsidiary to, a set of rules established by a particular artist. For example, the results of Jan Dibbets' day spent in his studio (*Shortest Day*, 1970) or Douglas Huebler prosaically poetic *Duration, Location and Variable Pieces* (1960), have a strong resemblance to Monk's work, but also in particular John Baldessari's Sunday drive in 1963 (*The Back Of All Trucks Passed While Driving From Los Angeles To Santa Barbara*, 1963). In addition, the indexical information hinged on everyday events determining the production, outcome and presentation of the aforementioned examples of works – whether it be Baldessari's accomplishment of documenting all the trucks he encountered along his journey (which reminded him of paintings he was doing around the same time), or, on the opposite scale, Huebler's somewhat utopian assertion to document the existence of every human being (*Variable Piece no. 70*, 1971) – all share further affinity with Monk's work. While the work *The Distance Between My Mother And My Sister* (1998), and indeed others, contain a span of citations for which this piece may not have been possible, it is his own quite distinctive method of revision in which he makes reference to his family background – the construct of him as a person – that ultimately forges a distance from Monk to his conceptual counterparts. His goal was directed towards a scenario that privileged failed events, which although he choreographed, his mother played a key role.

In his critique of the essence of conceptual art, American painter Al Held once remarked that Conceptual art is just pointing at things. Located at the core of Monk's work that we find the universal message of conceptual art shifted to an account of a personal story, demonstrating that it is both what is pointed at and the manner in which one points at things that makes the difference.

\*My sister was on holiday in Barbados during the time of asking her question. Coincidentally, she once lived in Leicester, the starting point of Monk's journey.

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