

Interview

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INVENTING THE ABACUS



ABOVE: "ABACUS" AT THE SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL. PHOTO COURTESY OF CALVIN KNIGHT

Consistently one of the best parts of the Sundance Film Festival, the expertly curated New Frontier program ups the ante on what art and storytelling can be. This year's program featured a tremendous 3D video montage by artist Marco Brambilla, a virtual reality experience of hunger in Los Angeles by Nonny de la Peña, and an enigmatic performance art project called Abacus.

The young, attractive, slightly deranged Paul Abacus (as he calls himself) was something of a celebrity on the streets of Park City last week, followed by a pair of Steadicam-wielding dancers and a hoard of paparazzi performance artists whose flashes were attached to resin cameras and lit the falling snow like confetti. These "Public Choreographies" were just part of the Abacus project. They also staged a press conference; and inside the New Frontier's theater, the charismatic Paul Abacus gave a TED-like talk, his ideas aided by high-tech visualizations, in what amounted to a moving and disturbing presentation on our relationship to screens and the future of national borders.

After the second performance of "Abacus," we spoke to Pauls' spokesperson and Abacus mastermind Lars Jan about his genre-bending and

ideas-driven enterprise.

DEENAH VOLLMER: Could you tell us a little bit about what you are doing here at Sundance?

LARS JAN: We are presenting Abacus, which is inspired by the thinking of Paul Abacus in particular, who is this sort of cult icon in Japan. He is influenced by a lot of other thinkers, particularly Buckminster Fuller and in addition, the presentation is on a deeper level about our revolving relationships to screens. It is sort of an unfolding of the presentation format: PowerPoint and boardroom pictures and educational, scientific book reports with a charismatic person standing in front of a screen of some kind. We are really interested in how there is a tremendous amount of well-funded and produced propaganda in our society. We are not particularly literate in terms of reading that propaganda, and we thought the presentation format was a good place to look at the challenges of encouraging that kind of literacy.

VOLLMER: What are the functions of the public choreographies?

JAN: Paul Abacus is always covered by two Steadicam operators. He has a personal flock of paparazzi, so there is this binary situation where there is content and then there is fascination with a certain kind of content, whether it's a person, or a subject, or a scandal. The performance is about unfolding and reframing the presentation format and thinking about how we relate to screens in terms of persuasion. These public choreographies are thinking about the objects of our fascinations and those systems, which feed us the objects of our fascinations.

VOLLMER: What is the relationship between the performance you are doing at the New Frontier space and the public performances?

JAN: The Oscar pre-show and the Oscar post-show have become longer than the Oscars themselves, which is already insanely bloated. These auxiliary parts are parts of our culture, which feed off of some kind of manufactured content, and they sort of just feed themselves. Essentially they are just supporting advertising money. In that sense we were really curious about auxiliary parts as they function in our culture in general, so we are staging a press conference and looking at a press conference and what makes up a press conference in terms of what the subject is, how a person behaves, how a person deflects questions, how a person is represented by a spokesperson who is able to absorb certain kinds of questions or blows from the outsider and how people, corporations in particular, are able to deflect and defuse scandal and actual truth-seeking and inquiry with a layer of smoke screen.

VOLLMER: Are you Paul's spokesperson?

JAN: I definitely bear a lot of the load of actually managing the logistics of what we do, and directing with venues and supporters, that sort of thing, because Paul is a bit shy, which is amazing because he has an idea that he wants to broadcast to everybody, which is a fundamental irony. But at this point I have been surrounded by his ideas and intentions for so long, that I feel really happy to play that role with him. I support his ideas a hundred percent.

VOLLMER: What compels you about his platform?

JAN: He is such a polymath and he is drawing from so many different genres of thought. His ultimate goals are very selfless in terms of being totally pragmatic and non-utopian. They make a ton of sense to me. He also has co-defined all these different feelings I've had and made me, in a fairly distinct way, see the world through an entirely different lens. And he is not dead, he is alive, and I have the capacity to actually support his vision. I just feel really lucky that we bumped into each other.

VOLLMER: Is he a cult leader?

JAN: That's funny, I have always called the group that's working on this project a cult, just because there are a bunch of men working on a project about big ideas that are kind of inherently problematic. But when I say male cult, I'm sort of saying it to be chic. I think his ideas are powerful, and he is charismatic in the sense that people often associate with cult or religious experiences. So there is a lot of affinity with that. At the same time, there is no membership for this, we don't monetize anything that we do. I think the biggest issue I ever had with religion was when money gets involved. I feel like when you are spreading an idea and you don't want anything in return, I feel like that speaks to the integrity of the idea in a different way. But yeah, not precisely a cult.

VOLLMER: How would you distill Paul's message to us as succinctly as possible?

JAN: Dissolving national borders will represent the next major step in social evolution. And it's not some sort of utopian or fanciful idea, but actually an incredibly efficient, sensible idea. Unfortunately, we are handicapped by antique ways of thinking that we have inherited and our entire current system is based on a series of events that were fairly happenstance and ossified not that long ago into something that we currently have. Until we break out of that in a significant way, we will continue to have all these stupid redundancies. Another really big strain is encouraging a new visual or media-based literacy in people. We hope to encourage other people to figure out, how the culture at large might become better at discerning well-funded or well-produced propaganda from poorly-funded or poorly-produced truths.

VOLLMER: Do you consider your performance to be a well-produced presentation? I found it to be very well produced. Are you critiquing your own performance?

JAN: Oh, that's funny. We are trying to embody some of the things we see in culture; in a way, the presentation is riffing on Steve Jobs pitching a new product or riffing on Colin Powell making a pitch to the UN about weapons of mass destruction, and on Joel Osteen, the world's most-watched televangelist, doing a show for 16,000 people in Houston five times a week. It's also riffing on the broken cathedral of experience and thinking about how language is related to scale and spectacle. While we are trying really hard to produce this well, I wouldn't call it well produced. I feel like this is a very passionately produced, but in a funny way, it's sort of impoverished presentation. Compared to a Presidential campaign, it is extraordinarily lo-fi; and compared to any corporate presentation or anything, it's insanely lo-fi.

VOLLMER: Are all of the graphs, statistics and ideas presented in the show factual?

JAN: Yes, all the data is real. And all the visualizations are not recorded. This is all super-custom software that generates those visuals as they are cued, and they are different every night, because it depends on his timing in terms of when Paul changes them. He is sort of painting them in real time based on certain skeletal structures that already exist of course. But they can be manipulated in real time so they can evolve in real time. And it's all data that is totally real.

VOLLMER: So do you consider it first and foremost an art piece? Or how do you define what the project is?

JAN: It's so funny, I feel like whenever I talk about what I do or what this piece is, I'm always sort of resisting that question. I think it is very artistic, but at the same time I feel like we couldn't be more serious about supporting the many important ideas that we really believe in. We want the ideas in the piece to transform and spread and become other people's and mutate however they need to, but we hope to inspire, to be a positive vessel for some of these ideas, and think that the culture will be great—better, will be improved, if some of these got more traction, maybe.

VOLLMER: I think that art is changing as it incorporates more media, technology, and a lot of the elements you guys appropriate. I think it becomes less clearly art and more almost a kind of a new journalism, a new way of communicating nonfiction messages. I feel that art and journalism are coming together, and I think that your piece is an example of that.

JAN: That's really interesting. I totally hear you on that. I actually have huge questions about the future of journalism and citizen reporters. What I'm thinking about and talking about is encouraging this new type of literacy, and helping our country's population get better at reading the culture that's being produced for them. Content is being controlled, journalists know what people want to be written more so than what they want to write.

VOLLMER: I'm wondering what role sincerity plays in your work.

JAN: Well, being an adult person, I've experienced betrayal and disappointment and things that pretty much everyone has experienced, so it becomes very hard to wear your heart completely on your sleeve. At the same time, I think the primary messages in Abacus and the things that Paul's articulating and that we're kind of going after, we feel completely and 100 percent sincere about. I feel the methods we employ in order to convey those messages are sincerely intended to support those ideas. And so, we do use age-old theatrical and performance techniques to do that, which may at times seem less than sincere but are actually part of the way that we deliver this message. So in order to successfully reference and riff and reconstitute those things, we have to take over those modes of production and shift them around and kind of regurgitate them. It's complicated, but the impulse behind it is completely sincere.

VOLLMER: Do you consider it at all a parody?

JAN: No, I keep thinking about it. It's funny, I think parodies and satire have a great place, and I really enjoy them but I feel like ultimately, in terms of making a change in our world, they're very limited, because I think it's a lot easier to satirize or parody something that's kind of obviously inert or dysfunctional or corrupt than it is to unfold, refract, break open and hopefully transform whatever's perceived in that case. I suppose the intention of parody is humor, and our intentions have a lot less to do with humor than to do with other things.

VOLLMER: Last question, why does Paul wear those football things below his eyes?

JAN: Oh, great question. He gets asked that all the time. He's had those ever since I met him, or saw a picture of him. He has actually many different answers, and I don't know which one is real. Maybe they're all real. One version is that when he was living in the Japanese subway, there were all of these girls who dresses like football players, who were costume players, and they wore black tape under their eyes, and so they gave him tape as an initiation or something, when he was recruited into that group. At other points he's said he uses it to protect his eyes from UV rays, and he's also said to me before that they cover scars, so I don't know.

FOR MORE ON PAUL ABACUS, VISIT HIS FACEBOOK PAGE.

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