

ArtWeek, February 2009:
Kiersten Puusemp: Whole Wide World
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The Box
October 25th through November 15th, 2008

In fits of pique or depression, everyone has dreamt of going as far away as humanly possible. On October 25th, the opening day of her solo exhibition at The Box, Kiersten Puusemp left Los Angeles. By the time people gathered for her artist's reception on November 8th, Puusemp was in a helicopter hovering over the Indian Ocean, as far from Los Angeles' Chinatown as geographically possible. Skipping town for a French territory in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Madagascar was not an escapist stunt, but a way of understanding the earth poetically and spatially. A project three years in the making, Whole Wide World is, in the words of the artist, "an attempt to touch something intangible, to physically experience something that cannot be sufficiently understood intellectually and to perceive the physical reality of a human existence that is limited to a concrete space within an infinite universe."

This is not the first time the artist has been conspicuously absent from her own opening. She missed the reception for her thesis show at USC because her piece, Long Run, consisted of running a marathon. Everything the artist didn't take on her expedition to the other side of the earth was left in the gallery. A nomad by nature, Puusemp's few belongings took up only a fraction of the gallery space; one is confronted with a few pieces of well packed luggage and sundry domestic and recreational items, but mostly white space prevails. Puusemp eschewed presenting her things as art objects, instead opting to leave the remainder of her belongings exactly as they were when she finished packing her bags on the gallery floor. It took a lot of planning, and presumably great expense, to reach the pinnacle of the dialectically physical and intangible experience that Puusemp describes, but the deeply personal nature of the project is both the exhibition's strength and its weakness. The poster for the exhibition which shows coordinates, maps, immunization records, and frequent flier mile calculations is one of the viewer's only windows into the process of the piece. However, the culmination of the work (if we are to assume that the spatial relationship that the artist initiates or "makes known" is the function of the piece) is largely private. One must laud Puusemp's curiosity and desire to explore the basic conditions of human experience. Regardless of her intentions, Puusemp opens many cans of worms simultaneously with Whole Wide World. Post studio art practice is old hat, so we're used to accepting a jumble, or in Puusemp's case orderly stacks, of non-art objects as art. But the artistic experience is difficult to pin down in Whole Wide World because the piece is both emphatically spatial, yet completely immaterial. How is the artistic encounter experienced? In a plane over the Indian Ocean? In Los Angeles thinking about a plane over the Indian Ocean? Is it all around us?

The exhibition elicits the contemplation of spatial relationships, the potential immateriality of art objects, the metaphorical artist's journey, and the artist's physical relationship to their art work in a globalized post-studio framework. However, Puusemp's refusal to channel her experience of this journey is the most frustrating aspect of the exhibition. With the exception of the exhibition poster, documentation doesn't play a role in the realization of this piece. Puusemp gives her audience little guidance. She ditches them in the dust while she takes her journey, leaving them with a room full of things she couldn't take with her and their own ideas.