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INTERVENE! INTERRUPT! RETHINKING ART AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

TEXT / JENNIE KLEIN

In 1998, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art presented *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, arguably the most important live art exhibition to take place in that decade. Ten years later and several hundred miles north, the University of California, Santa Cruz recently hosted an equally seminal live art conference and festival: *Intervene! Interrupt! Rethinking Art As Social Practice* [May 15–17, 2008]. Morning panel discussions on the role of art in building community and the problematic relationship between interventionist art and the gallery were followed by live art interventions done around campus and beyond. The festival culminated with the spectacular *Green Wedding #4* of Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens, fortuitously timed to take place just days after the California Supreme Court ruled in favor of same-sex unions.

In the pivotal essay she wrote for *Out of Actions's* catalogue, art historian Kristine Stiles argues that art action “was imagined as a means to remedy the aestheticism that transformed art as an integral part of the production of meaning in culture into the empty category of ‘art for art’s sake.’” The premise of *Intervene!* was that live art/action is inextricably woven from and into its social and political fabric. As such, it is the most efficacious way for an artist to extricate herself from the increasingly hermetic world of expensive objects made for the art market. In addition, *Intervene!* was conceptually indebted to the 2004-2005 exhibition *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* organized by Nato Thompson for MASS MoCA. In fact, *Intervene!* featured several of the same artists as *The Interventionists*, such as the Yes Men and The Center for Tactical Magic. Always iconoclastic, Thompson kicked off the first panel by posing a series of contradictory questions that undermined the binaries of institution/private/corporate versus artist/public/transgression that have characterized much of the discourse concerning public art actions over the last twenty years. Interventionist art, Thompson suggested, must remain mutable, responding to the particular social and political conditions in which it is deployed. The following day,



OPPOSITE, LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM: Elizabeth Stephens + Annie Sprinkle, *Green Wedding #4*, May 2008 (photo: Lydia Daniller); Gathering at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) Shakespeare Glen for Elizabeth Stephens' and Annie Sprinkle's *Green Wedding #4* (photo: Lydia Daniller); OPPOSITE, RIGHT: Adina Bar-On performing *LOI*, 2008 (photo: Jamie McMurry) ABOVE: TOP TO BOTTOM: Angela Ellsworth, sister wives construct floorplans for new homes in *Is This the Place II*, 2008, performance (photo: Cory Weeks); Guillermo Gómez-Peña performing *Green Wedding #4* sermon (photo: Charles Rath)



The Center for Tactical Magic staged an intervention at Wells Fargo in protest of their investment in Guantanamo Bay. Undercover tactical magicians brought business to a halt by occupying all of the tellers and loan officers for hours at a time, preventing them from doing their usual business in the process. Curator Shelby Graham organized *Interruption of Hierarchies*, an exhibition featuring relics of art made for social engagement, at the Sesnon Gallery at UCSC in conjunction with the festival. The highlight of that show was Packard Jennings' *Anarchist Action Figure*, 2007, which, in a move reminiscent of the Barbie Liberation Organization's shopdropping tactics from 1995, was planted in various Wal-Mart, Kmart, and Target stores. The video of the artist attempting to purchase the action figure at Target is simultaneously humorous and chilling.⁷ Everything, even anarchy, can be had for a price.

But *Intervene!* did not simply recapitulate the *Interventionists* exhibition. Rather, it was carefully curated to suggest the development of an

international genealogy of engaged actions under the rubric of "art." The festival began with a pre-conference seminar that included a discussion of curatorial practices and Allan Kaprow's work by Judith Rodenbeck. The following evening, the keynote address was given by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison on their collaborative environmental work since the 1970s. On the second day of the conference, Linda M. Montano, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens spoke on the panel "Art and Life: Life and Art". Although unable to be physically present due to illness, Suzanne Lacy was represented by *The Performing Archive: OPEN ACCESS*, a three-city conversation inspired by the archival remnants of the Oakland Project on which she worked from 1997 to 2000. The Sesnon Gallery also hosted Ant Farm's inflatable museum during the festival.

Morning panel discussions were followed by outdoor, site-specific actions/performances that took place in and around the Porter College

Quad. In comparison with the action/relics in the Sesnon Gallery, many of these pieces were incredibly subtle, even quiescent. Appropriately titled *Low Footprints*, these pieces unfolded slowly in time and space, demanding a heightened level of attention and mindfulness on the part of the viewer. During the two days of *Low Footprints*, Santa Cruz experienced an unprecedented heat wave, which raised the poignancy of these pieces by making the corporeal discomfort of the artists apparent. In particular, Marilyn Arsem's *Ocean's Rising*, performed twice on May 16, beautifully illustrated the increasing shortage of water. Holding a globular ball of ice in her cupped hands, a blindfolded Arsem stood in one place while the ice melted. Equally moving was Angela Ellsworth's *Is This the Place II*. Raised a Mormon, Ellsworth and several performers—including Tina Takemoto as the male patriarch—recreated the journey made by her polygamous ancestors who settled in Utah in order to build a utopian community. Ellsworth and her fellow

ABOVE, LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM: Lee Wen performing *everybody*, 2008 (photo: Shannon Cochrane); Hiroku Kikuchi performing *The Water is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, 2008, and Adina Bar-On performing *About Love*, 2008 (photo: Markus Wernli Sato); ABOVE RIGHT: Alejandra Herrera performing *51 starts*, 2008 (photo: Hiroko Kikuchi)



performers, wearing Mormon-style wigs, dragged sticks and pinecones into the shape of a foundation before moving on and repeating the action. Adina Bar-On's *LO!* made reference to her life companion's inability to say anything but "no" in Hebrew. Lee Wen riffed on the meaning of the body—and bodies in general—by pushing around a cardboard box sporting the scrawled words "Every Body" on its four sides while shouting and whispering "everybody." Like Arsem, Hiroku Kikuchi addressed the chronic shortage of potable water, particularly in California. In *The Water is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, Kikuchi neurotically and spastically danced with a hose in her mouth, pausing periodically to fill water balloons that trailed behind her as she moved through the quad. In *51 starts*, Alejandra Herrera methodically filled and then drank fifty-one glasses of red wine, upending each glass and allowing the wine to flow out of her mouth and down her neck and chest. By the end of the piece, the wine-drenched Herrera had literalized the

Christian communion, making her own body into the sacrificial wafer drenched in the blood of the lamb.

The final event of the festival, *Green Wedding #4*, was an extravagant affair that included twenty-one mini-performances, three large cakes, hors d'oeuvres, and a *Green Dinner* produced by Dogstar Catering. Dedicated to "love, compassion, earth, and environmentalism," *Green Wedding #4* was produced by Stephens' and Sprinkle's Love Art Laboratory. The colored weddings relate to Montano's *14 Years of Living Art*, a performance based on the seven chakras. For this piece, Montano wore the color of each chakra for an entire year, and then repeated the performance—for seven more years. She then bequeathed the work to other artists: Sprinkle and Stephens decided to make their love into art just as Montano has earlier blurred the lines between art and life by making herself a work of art. By proclaiming queer love as art, Sprinkle and Stephens performatively challenged love's

hetero-normative construction, which made legalized gay marriage a seemingly unattainable goal. If *Out of Actions* suggested that live art was no longer relevant, then *Intervene!* has reintroduced an optimistic belief that action/live art can make a difference.

NOTES

1. Kristine Stiles, "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions," *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, Paul Schimmel, ed., Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998, 235.
2. See <http://centennialsociety.com/durham.html>, accessed June 10, 2008.

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ABOVE, LEFT: Marilyn Arsem performing *Ocean's Rising*, 2008 (photo: Natalie Loveless); ABOVE, RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: Adina Bar-On performing *40 x 40*, 2008 (photo: Natalie Loveless); Adina Bar-On performing *About Love*, 2008 (photo: Jamie McMurry)