

Dragster and drag queens, beatification and beating off Simon Herbert

There was a brief period at the beginning of the Nineties in the United States, partially fuelled by a presidential election contest desperately looking for defining issues, when the matter of whether taxpayers monies should be used to support public artworks that offended (some) mainstream sensibilities was whipped up into a coast to coast media circus by a number of high profile conservatives, including Senator Jesse Helms and Reverend Don Wildmon of the American Family Association. As George Bush discovered to his chagrin, it was the economy, stupid, that was foremost in voter's minds, and not whether photographers displaying self-portraits of rectally challenged whips or performance artists covering themselves in chocolate and alfalfa constituted a capital offense. Nevertheless, for a short period the marginal and the mainstream found themselves in a strange and frantic arm lock, a magnified coalescence of all the mutual distrusts and loathings that continue to bubble through the two polarised camps. Performance artists took to the streets and pleaded their case, stigmata arrayed against stigma, preaching words of compassion, whilst crazed southern gentlemen strode marbled floors, theatrically ripping up 'obscene' photographs and casting them to the four corners of the senate. It was the Sixties Lite; protestors encamped outside the gates of power, bloated incumbents sending out the attack dogs, both parties fighting for the spiritual futures and bodily fluids of the people.

Steven Durland, then editor of High Performance (based on the West Coast of the United States), neatly summed up both the passion and the farce of the period in his observation that "the performance artists had become the evangelists, and the evangelists had become the performance artists." It was a typical observation, characteristic of a consistent editorial style during the twenty year run of High Performance (from the late Seventies to the late Nineties) that usually cut to the heart of serious issues whilst retaining a sly objective distance; an analysis of the theatre of the absurd with a concomitant sense of absurdity. High Performance was a revolutionary magazine in a number of ways. It embodied founder Linda Frye Burnham's commitment to the

political and philosophical underpinnings of the counter-culture, a mapping of guerrilla activity that erupted from, and then fed back into, the cultural fractures of the Sixties onwards. Each issue covered as wide a range of activities as could fall under the rubric of experimental art, mixing review and information sections with extended essays on thematic or social concerns of the time. It was utterly unique as a magazine; as an organ of analysis and advocacy for the kind of marginal art that was not normally covered, its priorities shifted over the years, both as a matter of editorial imperative and as a nod to the chameleon nature of its core constituency.

In the introduction to "The Citizen Artist —An Anthology from High Performance Magazine 1978-1998" Durland

sums up the magazine's mission statement as follows:

"Throughout its twenty year history High Performance magazine has been a journalistic home for new, unrecognized and innovative work in the arts. From its beginnings in performance art to its last few years covering community-based art, the magazine maintained a steady focus on art that was serious in its personal artistic intent and underappreciated in public perception... We considered our editorial approach to be a useful foundation for, and precursor to, the development of critical discussion around the art we covered. And when the form such as performance art became validated to the point of being part of the critical discourse, it was time for us to look in new directions."

His conclusion that "Our editorial journey took us down some roads that later became freeways, and some roads that are now overgrown with weeds", and that the cover of the first issue featured artist Suzanne Lacey sitting on a dragster, sums up the metaphorical tone of this anthology. The majority of artists included demonstrate the kind of hope that lies at the heart of that most American of myths: the road movie. Most have worked, or are working, in a US context —whether this be within the diaspora of race or the advocacy of health issues —and, although the individual contexts may be radically different, they share the commonality of a personal artistic quest.

The title "The Citizen Artist", with its suggestions of responsibility and a causality between personal and communal activity, is both provocative and contentious. After all, much art activity that has come from the live art and multi-disciplinary arena has not exactly been fuelled by notions of benign participation or the democratisation of creative processes. The destructive urge —or at the very least a kind of interrogative nihilism — has been referenced in critical analyses of the field almost as a matter of course. The controversial live works of Chris Burden, which interrogated aspects of obligation by the creation of direct risk, or the grotesque debasements of Paul McCarthy, which were both regularly covered at length in the pages of High Performance, are significantly absent from this collection. However, any fears that "The Citizen Artist" is a form of selective cultural neutering are allayed by a number of factors. Firstly, as Durland points out "...we realised that there was no one anthology that could both reflect the history of the magazine and at the same time exist as a coherent book. So we settled for the fact that this is an anthology... not the anthology from High Performance". Secondly, there is already a profusion of reference books on the viscerally subversive aspects of live art (such as the excellent series of Re/Search publications which also emanates from the West Coast).

Frye Burnham and Durland's criteria for reprinting essays seems to have been motivated by a desire to address questions of artistic production that are far more interesting than retreading the familiar paths that chart ad nauseum the schism between the provocative art guerrilla and a reactionary mainstream. The real issue, whether voiced explicitly or hinted at, is how, through one's practice, to self-determine and, by extension,



assist in the self-determination of others. In effect, what constitutes radical practice now, and how has this been effected by what was previously considered radical practice?

"The Citizen Artist" attempts to broadly depict the changing definitions of the margins over the last twenty years by structuring the anthology in three distinct sections: "The Art/Life Experiment", "The Artist as Activist", and "The Artist as Citizen". Each section is general-

ly chronological (although Durland is quick to point out that such a linear approach is overly simplistic, and certain motifs recur throughout): "The Art/Life Experiment" covers the early pioneering work of artists who for the first time attempted to break down distinctions between Art and Life, resulting in projects such as the body art of artists Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh (who spent a year tied together by an eight foot length of rope), the rise of eco-art, and most significantly the initial development of feminist art practice: "The Artist as Activist", charts the following phase, when artists began to engage with the development and maintenance of ideologies specific to both a variety of identities —multi-cultural, gender, sexual —and objectives —empowerment, protest, education, advocacy, etc: "The Artist as Citizen", the final and most expansive section, contains what one imagines is Frye Burnham's paradigm —an artist or artists located in a specific community and working in tandem with its members in a microcosmic sense in which relationships are finite and local. As such, interviews are featured with artists working at a grass roots level; in the contexts of prisons and community centres, or organising workshops for doctors and nurses ("Caring for the Carers").

The arc of the three sections is one which reinforces the editor's prejudices in suggesting a gradual sea change of artistic consciousness over two decades, from the establishment of artistic communities and the process of self-realisation, to the use of interventionist practice to either represent or involve communities traditionally perceived as distinct from —or ignored by —historical Eurocentricity, through to surrendering at least some measure of artistic autonomy in preference to initiating more organic forms of collaborative practice. As a scenario it has its attractions, but it remains a wistful blueprint, full of inherent stresses. Whilst "The Citizen Artist" does not attempt to disguise that a kinder gentler artist is the preferred role model du jour, it also allows individual contradictions or disagreements to become apparent (thereby maintaining the flavour of the original High Performance magazine).

The central irony of the concept of the Citizen as Artist is that even those artists who are committed to leaving their ivory tower often have to contend with a certain amount of initial mistrust or hostility in the bigger badder world. The label of citizen may be adopted autonomously by any old artist, but it only becomes resonant when conferred, in part, by the external benediction of non-art communities. What is fascinating is how the terms and conditions of these negotiations have changed over the last two decades, and why this anthology very nearly ends up confirming popular





prejudices about crazy artists as much as it demolishes them. The general urge of artists who wish to be 'contemporary' has been to hitch their wagons to the nearest zeitgeist, and as new zeitgeists come along the older ones tend to become a little creaky. Inevitably, the passing of time has been less charitable to some artistic pronouncements than others. This is most evident in the first section of the book, the grand Art/Life Experiment, in which quotes such as: "Thus we have passed into a new worldview where we have gone beyond our anchor in the solar system to an even more integrated connection in the galactic core" in Barbara T. Smith's investigation of shamanic practice; or Rachel Rosenthal's description of her weekend workshops, in which: "For a weekend, two days and a half, I am a saint. My aim for that one weekend is to really take the spirit of the people who are there and give a bath to the spirit." — tend to (at least to a thirtysomething like myself) reinforce the cliché of the barking mad performance artist, complete with West Coast Dawns, Harmonic Convergences, Beautiful Natives, Earth Goddesses, Cheesecloth, Group Hugs and Candles.

It is easy to take these quotes out of context, and paint a picture of desperately earnest artists struggling in the tar pits of history (damned if this West Coast/American stuff doesn't come with a helpful metaphor every other sentence!), but whilst it is difficult to avoid observing that other similar examples form a wish list of crackpot aspirations that would sound cheesy in a Miss World contest, a steelier picture also begins to emerge as a flipside to the epiphet. Earlier in her interview Rosenthal paints a vivid and prescient picture of eco-rape that is both concise and articulate, describing a world that is at least as crazy as her own artistic universe. Cheri Gaulke's history of "The Women's Building" may put an inordinate amount of faith in the metaphorical power of an eight foot papier-mâché woman, erected on the building's roof as "a beacon of women's power to the community", but then maybe that was the kind of morale-booster that women artists needed when attempting to establish self-sustaining women's groups at a time when there were no precedents (let alone state funding).

Certainly, the editors seem confident enough to surrender their charges and let them take their own chances with the forces of history, and seem to think that the reader is big enough and stupid enough to draw his or her own informed conclusions.

The cumulative realisation that gradually dawns whilst reading through all these documents, testimonials and anecdotes is that what "The Citizen Artist" achieves most effectively is the way in which it illustrates just exactly how much artists position themselves in relation to the

realities of their respective time. Priorities shift and rhetoric changes. Cause and effect is a familiar notion to artists, because they generally have so many causes and fear in the early hours of the morning that they may have so little effect.

"The Artist As Activist" section deals with artists whose moral compass had not significantly shifted—all the same ethical concerns are evident—but was certainly being pulled by a different gravitas. This was the era when the issue of identity—who had it, who didn't have it, who had an inalienable right to proclaim it, who had better keep his mouth shut—became a key issue for artistic analysis. Identity could be problematic as well as being positive. How did the identity of an artist relate to the identity of a non-art community? Could the former represent the latter? With or without that community's sanction? Lucy Lippard's coverage of the AIDS awareness projects of David Nash includes a quote from critic Douglas Crimp which pretty much sums up the feelings of the time:

"Art does have the power to save lives... But if we are to do this, we will have to abandon the idealistic concept of art. We don't need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS."

Artists of colour were also working to achieve a level of visibility, creating broader awareness of the politics of ethnicity and colonialism. Artists such as Native American James Luna purposefully sought to avoid the tag of the "exotic", a stubborn refusal to be co-opted easily by institutional sentimentality:

"That's why I dislike the movie *Dances With Wolves*. It did nothing but glorify all the good. It didn't show any Indians mad, or upset... any Indians fucking up. We're still beautiful, stoic and pretty. You see the movie and you go out and see a fat, overweight, acne-covered, poor uneducated person—is that the real Indian you want to see?"

This was a time when the artwork of artists tended to reject the metaphorical optimism of its predecessors and became more specific, more pragmatic, more willing to cause offence to some if the process of alienation made a potent point—all necessary approaches when faced with the disintegration a singular authentic voice or homogeneous creative creed. As celebrated performance artist Karen Finley observes:

"Reality is always more shocking than art. I think that shock in art is followed by some kind of transformation that happens because of the artist. I mean, you could say that [experiencing the poverty of] Second Street between Avenues A and B is an artwork, and that's not so. It's not enough just to have the shocking thing, disassociated from everything. The artist frames it or mirrors it with brilliance or timeliness. I don't know that there's a clear line between what is an atrocity and what's art. I do know that when Chris Burden shot himself in the arm it was art, but when my father shot himself it wasn't."

The activist urge sometimes necessitated the identity of the artist to be almost completely subsumed, as in the work of Mexican artist Felipe Ehrenberg. When the Tepito district of Mexico City was devastated by earthquake, Ehrenberg undertook a project of reconstruction, organising a volunteer brigade (Tepitos) to comfort survivors, distributing food and clothing, opening a bank account administered by the Committee for the Reconstruction of Tepito. Emily Hicks observes that:

"For him, the goal is not to be a pop star, but a responsible citizen/activist."

Such a goal is at the heart of the final section, "The Artist as Citizen". It is not necessarily a popular one (savaged by critics such as Robert Hughes in his critique "Culture of Complaint") or a desirable one for many artists, not least because it calls for different modes of critical evaluation to

be formulated. The essays in this final section tend to avoid manifestos in favour of specific detail, and are far too complex to summarise here (this section alone contains 17 case studies). Suffice to say that projects such as Marty Pottinger's multimedia record of the lives of the people involved in making New York's City Water Tunnel #3 (the largest non-defense public-works project in the Western hemisphere), intergenerational arts coordination projects such as New York's Elders Share the Arts (ESTA), or Grady Hillman's "arts-in-corrections" residency schemes, undertaken in over 50 correctional facilities since 1981 (containing the best damn hard nosed economic riposte to those who believe that prisoners shouldn't benefit from the arts as school programmes are simultaneously closed down), are, whilst not quite enough to convince a congenial loner like myself to enter into the dreaded ambiguity of collaboration, certainly testament to the diversity of committed and—in its own terms of reference—clear-sighted public art methodologies.

If I have a specific caveat against this anthology it is that the issues it raises are so huge that it cries out for a little external contextualisation. The editors have purposefully focused on interviews with artists, often by other artists, or first person essays by artists; consequently, as Durland admits "...sometimes the analysis one expects in an anthology is left up to the reader." This might be a minor point (although I would have liked to have seen a few more devil's advocates prodding their forks into these angels...), given that this is made clear from the start, but it does impact on certain sections that need clearer contextual and explanatory text, or even images (maybe not a problem in the original magazine format). Also, there is a missed opportunity to re-examine the efficacy of artistic methodologies in retrospect, and test the claims of artists. For instance, there is mention off the hugely influential cross-country San Diego/Tijuana artists' collective Taller de Arte Fronterizo, but no postscript explaining the circumstances behind the group's break-up and how this impacted on subsequent post-colonial strategies. Similarly, I was curious as to how artists working as activists in the field of AIDS-related health care will have modified their approach in the late Nineties, in respect of factors such as more efficient medicinal filter blocks, or increased public apathy towards an epidemic that is now over a decade old.

Sadly, such questions would still be raised if journalists from High Performance were still darting around asking the right questions of the right practitioners, but the magazine ended its run in 1998. This is a shame for too many reasons to list here, so I will mention just one. Whether one agrees with some or all of these artistic voices, what is evident is an intention to create relevant public art that is created from the bottom up. This anthology is timely given the current UK context of lottery money for the arts, which is creating definitions of "socially useful" artists from the top down by attaching conditions of audience development and youth participation.

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