

Barbara T. Smith

Old Shoes: Performance Relics 1968-1975

November 21, 2009-January 23, 2010

Performance Descriptions:

(Numbers in Bold Correspond to Checklist and Gallery Map)

(1) *One Evening 1968* Two of four pieces from that concert performed at the Old LA conservatory of Music.

One Minute, 1968

Three photographs from my first public performance. Lasting exactly one minute, four people stand on a square of black plastic sheeting. Two of us are in white, two in black. Accompanied by sounds of sighing and the sea, each of us performs an unconventional action with the material in our quadrant. The man is making a checker board of dry ice; I am braiding plastic film protruding from the center of my space; the other black-dressed woman is systematically crushing eggs with her bare feet, and the other woman in white is making mirrors reflect light on the walls. It was a piece about both freedom (to use materials as art any way we wanted) and emptiness of intrinsic meaning.

Snails, 1968

A diagrammatic drawing from an intricate piece with several performers shows a couple of "snails" who crawl along a shiny path of glitter, and three women in sweat suits sucking on 'sky hooks', four people sitting at a small table and tumbling marbles in their laps etc. In the piece I traversed the various settings and finally arrive at the women in sweats. There I cut off their clothes revealing that each body is painted totally red, yellow or blue, whereupon they and I exit the piece. These very first public performances of mine were confrontations with the emptiness and absurdity of conventional life and wishful thinking, and for me acted as prayers. My discovery of the three primary colors on women's bodies constituted, as I see it now, a ray of hope.

(2) *Ritual Meal, 1968*

Sixteen guests attired in surgical garb, were seated at a table where they were served a 6 course meal presented and eaten with surgical tools (i.e. test tubes, forceps, clamps, beakers, plasma bottles often raw or variously resembling organs or flesh) in a room shattered by films and projections on the walls like these prints seen here in the gallery (human heart beating in an open heart surgery, ocean waves, slides of galaxies, body systems, films of the waiters naked hiking). Multiple loops of various sounds were combined with live synthesizer music (unseen) and the continuous deep and loud beating of a human heart. Attendants never spoke nor told them what to do. The experience was a dilemma of seeming to be consuming a body and a simultaneous union with the cosmos. Location: Stanley and Elyse Grinstein's home.

A TRIPTYCH:

(3) #1: *Fire Rings, 1969*

Fifteen cement fire rings were set with wood and chemicals to burst into flame by spontaneous combustion at night on Newport Beach. A loud and continuous electronic sine wave pervaded the beach as an enveloping fog rolled in. As flames mysteriously appeared in each pit, participants approached two huge screens of polyethylene and set them afire. The fog began to clear and attendants altered the way the fire rings burned by adding other chemicals creating flames of color. When the fires died away large fish were brought forth, cooked and eaten. Implications of the enormity of creation beyond our control except to augment and nurture

(4) #2 *Mass Meal 1969*

My studio was created into an environment where visitors were confronted with an intense sensory experience. Blinding 1000watt light greeted them at the door, intense, loud cyclic music (by Joseph Byrd and myself) played continuously. The space was divided into three sections: to the right was a framed-in room with sides of translucent polyethylene to the right; straight ahead four day-glo panels hung with 6 hot roasts of meat wired to each and with a 1000 watt light in their midst, and a third hallway had a table with three pots of red, yellow and blue paint respectively and piles of foam rubber pieces on the floor beside it. At the end of the hallway in ultra violet light was a thinly delineated target. The situation was leaderless. (I was in an adjoining room but never appeared.) Left to themselves the participants gradually fell into chaos; they cut their way in to the pristine white room and found the wine in the Styrofoam cups, threw meat dipped in paint at the walls and each other and tore the day-glo panels down and smashed two to bits. The room/my studio was entirely trashed and violated.



(5) #3 Plots 1970

My unconscious simply delivered these metaphors to me, both obvious and profoundly deep. I feared that I would never survive this new calling for my life with no practical skills and having always been sheltered. I went into four fields of weeds where I planted tiny succulents from a nursery feeling fairly certain they would not survive, but be plowed under. And they were.

At one site we were trespassing and police came requiring that we move. The hill site in Eagle Rock was planted in memory of Kyle Workman, an artist who had recently committed suicide. I was deeply affected when any artist tried to kill him/herself.

(6) Celebration of the Holy Squash, 1971

The relic of a communal meal, the shell of a large Hubbard Squash became to me a beautiful, holy relic. I determined to create of it a religion and in the process embed it in resin, to remain an object of reverence for centuries. Those who assisted became the disciples and converts. None were turned away. Over an 8 day period a mold was built, resin was cast around the sacred decaying squash creating a large faintly purple lozenge of about 150 pounds. Mass was celebrated; the holy squash was baptized. Miracles, persecutions and betrayals occurred. This religion re-integrated body and spirit, sexuality and the sacred; all attested to in the L. A. legal newspaper as an authentic religion. Too long a tale to tell. A Bible will follow. This occurred in the University of California Irvine Gallery

(7) Light Watch 1971

A piece in two parts: I noticed that the Field Piece fiberglass blades had the property of concentrating light at the top. I got a permit and took one of them to the back tidal bay in Newport Beach. We set it at the mean of the high and low tides and along with Joe Ray and his time-lapse camera made a film of it as the water and shore birds appeared to rush in and out and darkness ensued and the morning light returned at the pull of the cosmos.

That night we gathered at F-space Gallery surrounded by photographs I'd taken of the process of building The Field Piece to listen to Dr. Chip Arp, Cal Tech astronomer, tell us about the quasars he and others have discovered at the far reaches of the universe. This was about the wonder of it all.

(8) Nude Frieze, 1972

I saw the context of art and specifically the F-space Gallery as a place of literal sanctuary at that time in the U.S. And like in the Byzantine mosaics (and present day construction sites), creators, workers and subjects, were all anonymous and unconcerned about personal fame. I created a construction site where, accompanied by Gregorian chants and rock music, workers suspended subjects on the wall (by staples into duct tape) forming a human frieze. Quickly others would pencil in a field of lines between them creating the residual shape of the former body when it was removed. Observers could watch the roped off construction. There was a hierarchical organization between me as the architect where I, in a near oblivious state of lofty clarity, made drawings and wore welders glasses, as my foreman and the workers carried out the plan. Eventually the subjects on the wall who, because of their actual discomfort, became like tortured martyrs until removed from the wall.

F-space then remained a sanctuary to visit for the rest of the month.

(9) The Fisherman is the Fish, 1972

This time I am the martyr. It was a two-day piece structured like a Zen koan. Day one: I was wired to the wall. A man in a suit and hat sat some 25 feet in front of me. A film of trout fishing was projected on my naked body as the audience watched in the dark. Two assistants poured brilliant colored pigments in oil over me as a voice from the man tried to entice me to come to him so he could take care of me, teach me to fish, etc. When in a trance I pulled myself away and walked towards him I found an empty jacket & hat. I put them on and walked directly to the wall again as the film quit. In the dark all were given a fresh trout to hold.

Day two: Roles were reversed, I dry-fly fished into a fog in the gallery where I caught a 'trout' (dancer) whom I subdued and then carried out (and must care for). Because of the back lash of the fishing line, the audience had to watch outside through a scrim. They were given lures, actual dry-flies at the end to keep. At F-Space.

(10) The Way To Be, 1972

I traveled from San Francisco to the Henry Gallery at the University of Washington in Seattle where I was invited to be in one of the early group shows for women (*Survivors '72*). En route I dressed in white pants, jacket, and surgical cap. I painted my face half white with black eyeliner, and half red with green and went this way in all public places neither speaking to explain or defend myself.



Two male friends traveled with me to document and interview people pretending not to know me at all. Photo documentation and audio tapes were exhibited immediately after my journey in the gallery. This was an exploration of the content of consciousness and the nature of identity when there was no common structure or thread of signification to assure meaning. It was psychologically very difficult.

(11) *Feed Me, 1973*

This piece took place between sunset and sunrise at the Museum of Conceptual Art in San Francisco during an event called "All Night Sculptures" in the women's rest room of the 1920s building. The relatively large room had a single toilet behind a door and a wash basin at one end. I sat naked on a divan surrounded by items of sensual connection (bread & cheese, fruit, drinks, books to read, massage oils and perfumes, tea and coffee, beads and ornaments, marijuana, etc.) and one person at a time was allowed to enter. A tape loop in a corner played my voice saying: "Feed Me, Feed Me," over and over. The rumor was that I intended to let every man who entered make love with me. My intention was to turn the situation around so the man would have to discover by interacting with me what would please or be nurturing rather than simply taking as if by divine right. It was a request for subtlety, sensuousness and complexity rather than mere lust. I was given every nuance of the room's potential, (which included making love), in a sequence of super-intensified encounters (due to the heightened awareness and focused intensity of the piece and the context of the times). Sixteen men and three women came in. A few of the books and a small journal I wrote in the next day are on a shelf in the show.

(12) *Pure Food, 1973*

Feed Me was amazing and overwhelming. In response I needed to be alone and receive just from God or Nature. I sat all day in a favorite field in Costa Mesa on a bluff overlooking the sea (and the nearby oil wells) receiving the pure cosmic rays of sun and cosmos which are totally satisfying. A friend photographed periodically from afar.

(13) *Intimations of immortality, 1974*

I had a gnawing fear that because of the vagaries of being an artist, I might become impoverished and homeless. I had never really seen a "bag lady" in Mac Arthur Park among the many homelessmen, but I imagined they were there. I set out to find one; it took five weeks. This piece became an exchange between myself and three women who frequented the park. One who was also alcoholic actually lived there. Each agreed to sit, one at a time, on a park bench in the Grandview Gallery in the Women's Building while I took their place daily in the park for the ensuing month. (I also gave them lunch each day and \$5.00) On the last day one of them induced her park friends, a group of semi-blind, alcoholic, vagrant men, to come to the gallery to sing and play their instruments as they do in the park. This became the only real and joyful bridge of connection between these two rarefied worlds, the gallery goes in the Woman's' Building and the few poor and homeless women from the park.

I include pictures of these very strong women and a copy of the contract they signed in agreement to do the piece.

(14) *The Longest Day of Night, 1973*

It was the winter solstice and the comet Kahoutek was approaching the earth. I created a dinner on that evening that began at midnight. The guests were invited to wear formal clothes of black grey or silver. It was held in the upstairs foyer of my studio building in Pasadena that had a 60 foot skylight. The waiters were clothed in black like shadows. A man in a rhinestone studded tux with a black Great Dane greeted the guests at the bottom of the stairs. The long black table was strewn with high intensity bulbs (as seen in this show) and bracketed by airplane landing lights. A copper wire attached to a Tesla coil extended overhead. There were dancers who performed as shadows and "aliens" who appeared above in the skylight. The many courses of food were all black (see the framed menu). At midnight we drove to the top of Mt Wilson to witness Kahoutek who was, sadly, lost in distant clouds. It was a piece about light and dark, the moment of maximum dark and the initiation of light with the alien visitor.

(15) *Full Jar, Empty Jar, 1974*

This two-part piece was introduced by a man in white who then sits and pours grain from one large jar to another and back again during each part.

The first part had roughly a Judaic/Christian look and context and the second an Eastern or Hindu/Buddhist setting.

For part one, I entered the room wearing a long blonde wig and a man's black suit and hat, my hands dripping with blood. I sat at a table laid with a cloth with bread, fruit and wine. As I placed my hands on the table, lights go out and a black light illuminates the now fluorescent food as I eat it. Two recorded voices are heard repeating the 23rd Psalm, "For though I walk through the valley of death...etc." After the fourth repetition I exit as one voice says "Rachel, Rachel, crying in the wilderness, for her children, for they are no more." (A truth I was being forced to accept as my own children were being kept from me in a way I could not alter).



In part two, the audience is now told that they may go into the next room one at a time to ask the person there a question. As each one entered they found me sitting guru-like in a white room bathed in light, wearing white and entirely bald. The startled visitors each asked one question as I maintained a state of pure trance-like neutrality allowing the questions to answer themselves, acting merely as an empty mirror or vessel. This took about 2 1/2 hours for about 50-60 people. It was at the Mandeville Gallery UCSD in conjunction with a 'retrospective' of documentation of prior work.

(16) *Scan I, 1974*

There were two audiences. The 40 performers (wearing white clothes and hoods) sat on bleachers watching a television monitor showing commercials. The art audience watched. The hooded group had brightly painted tongues and mouths and bubble gum, cigarettes, and party blowers giving them both a menacing and yet inane appearance. At secret cues imbedded within the commercials, they would perform on cue their oral gesticulation as part of an overall 'picture' (like a choreographed cheering section) mirroring the scan pattern in the technology of television itself. The resulting absurd 'image' appeared to be disturbances in a field of 'snow.' They performed seven separate scans. The art audience was then invited to sit in the bleachers to try to discover what were the cues and each was given an 'all day sucker.' A few hoods and a booklet with the cue cards are in the show. This piece happened at the Women's Building.

(17) *Kiss a Spot Forbidden, 1975*

Again a two part piece comparing two extremes of nature: the sea and the desert. To go too far into the ocean courts panic and drowning, and to go too far into the desert courts dying of thirst or insanity but also the possibility of an oasis. (This piece came from an extreme recent personal experience and was an attempt to grapple with it by bringing it into a larger arena of investigation and universality).

Using a swimming pool as a metaphor for the sea, I dove in while an audiotape told of my long familiarity with the ocean and yet I experienced an inexplicable near-suicide there. At the bottom of the pool I found a plastic bag with pieces of wood which once released rose to the surface. This flotsam contained my wild and panicked mind stream as I found my way to rescue myself.

Then called forth by black draped wind whipped harpies I raced into the nearby desert following them (The audience must run after me and do!) I am plagued by these harpy voices who challenged my sanity, stability and reality but eventually I found an oasis of water and 'salvation.' To die in the water is forbidden **X**, to find an oasis spot in nature is safe **X**, to receive a kiss is connection **X**. A man comes out of nowhere, runs up and kisses me. We dash off, 'abandoning' the audience to find their own way back. The piece took place at University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

