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All The World...

In staging large-scale participatory events, artists are creating new narratives for our cultural landscape by Nancy Spector

The exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg's 'Combines', which opened recently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is a glorious testament to the artist's explosive, proto-Pop vision. It traces the decade (from 1954 to 1964) when the artist broke through the picture plane to embrace the flux and flotsam of everyday life. While Rauschenberg's unbridled creative energy and paradigm-shattering gestures cannot be disputed, what struck me about the exhibition was how quaint the work seems today. The faded newsprint, old paisley fabrics, rusting wires and shabby plumage of taxidermied birds made the three-dimensional collages look like relics; emblems of a once radical moment when the real world promised to penetrate and forever alter the aesthetic realm. But it was less the physical condition of the works than the attitude they conveyed that made me think about their ultimate failure to change anything beyond the inventory of materials available for image- or object-making. Artists no longer had merely to represent the world; they could now actually use it as fodder for their work. The world, however, stayed pretty much the same.

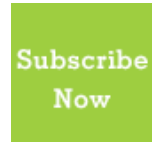
At approximately the same time that Rauschenberg was mating tyres and angora goats with splattered paint in New York a group of artists, filmmakers and theorists in Europe were also contemplating the intersection of art and life, but to more critically engaged political ends. Members of the Situationist International (1957-72) – Guy Debord, Michèle Bernstein, Asger Jorn, Constant and Raoul Vaneigem, among others – believed that art, once divorced from its status as a commodifiable entity, could permeate and reconfigure everyday existence. Their strategies involved the subversive appropriation of mass-media communication, architectural interventions on a civic scale and an eccentric mode of navigating through urban space that was designed to disrupt the normal flows of capital and its attendant class system. In an early manifesto Debord called for the 'construction of situations' rather than the production of discrete aesthetic objects, with the goal of nothing less than a revolution against bourgeois values. While the impact of its ideas was manifest in the uprisings of May 1968, the Situationist International ultimately imploded from within, shattered by infighting and over-narrow interpretations of its mission – historically the fate of many avant-garde movements.

I have been thinking about Rauschenberg and the Situationists recently as two (albeit unlikely) sides of the same coin in an effort to understand the historical precedents for what appears to be an emerging trend or, at the very least, a shared sensibility among some individual artists who are exploring the confluence of art and life. They are combining Rauschenberg's incorporative tendencies with the Situationists' programmatic call for the dissolution of art into lived experience to produce work that infiltrates the world and subtly alters reality by rewriting its cultural narratives. Situating their art firmly within the everyday, they are each creating 'real' fictions with the goal of modifying the very fabric of our social discourse. These fictions are often staged as events, but it is less the performative aspect of the work than the way it is remembered, discussed and disseminated within the public's collective consciousness that constitutes the conceptual core of each project. In short, the artists are producing contemporary myths from the stuff of the real world, converting the ordinary into the remarkable or, at least, the merely memorable.

I first became aware of this tendency in 2002, when Francis Alÿs moved a mountain – or so the story goes. As his contribution to the third Ibero American Biennial, Lima, the artist directed 500 shovel-wielding volunteers standing in a single line at the base of a 1,600 foot-long sand dune to displace enough earth to shift its location, albeit by just a few inches. This project, When Faith Moves Mountains, evolved out of Alÿs' response to the havoc wreaked by the decade-long presidency of Alberto Fujimori in Peru. In a place of such severe deprivation and desolation he wanted to create an extreme yet poetic gesture that would reverberate beyond the comfortable confines of the art-viewing audience. Hence Alÿs gave



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the inhabitants of Lima a 'social allegory' to tell and retell until it becomes the stuff of local legend, a story recounting the day the earth moved. Although there are photographs and a video installation documenting this most ephemeral of earthworks, the art, according to Alÿs, can be fully realized only through the recitation and circulation of its narrative. He understands this process as the fabrication of a myth, which, rather than being about the perpetuation of political or cultural values imposed from above, requires the direct interpretive participation of the audience, who must determine the work's meaning in relation to its own experience.¹

In a similar but entirely independent vein Pierre Huyghe is also a catalyst. With works such as *Streamside Day Follies* (2003) he interjects new narratives into the cultural landscape, allowing them to evolve as they will and to affect reality in unpredictable ways. Commissioned by the Dia Art Foundation, the project was presented in the form of a film installation: movable walls periodically enclosed the viewer to create a pavilion or temporary cinema for the viewing of Huyghe's film, which was shot in a new suburban residential development called *Streamside Knolls* in upstate New York. But this installation was just one link in a chain of events that the artist initiated in the planned community, which marketed itself as a suburban oasis, close to nature yet neighbourly, rural yet sophisticated. Interested in creating some form of repeatable event – a performance that would outlive its essential ephemerality by being re-enacted again and again – Huyghe collaborated with the inhabitants of *Streamside Knolls* to establish a 'Founding Day' celebration. He set the score for a communal fête – that there should be music, speeches, masks, refreshments and a parade – but allowed the celebrants to choreograph their own affair. Part pageant, part picnic, the day-long event comprises the core of Huyghe's film, but this is just one iteration of what now should become an annual tradition in the community, a tradition that will no doubt mutate over time. Huyghe's plans for *Streamside Knolls* also include the construction of a community centre designed by his collaborator, architect François Roche. This site will serve as a locus for the festivities, whatever form they eventually take. For Huyghe the replay of the event is fundamentally more important than the original action itself.² This represents a slippage from the aesthetic to the real or at least to the systems of representation and repetition that have come to constitute the real. In Huyghe's mind this slippage has analogues in our current political climate, in which reality is often an invention, any commentary on it is predetermined and its image is tightly controlled.³

When Aleksandra Mir staged her moon landing on a beach in the Netherlands in 1999, she was acutely aware of the role the media can play in disseminating and preserving an otherwise ephemeral event. The performative aspect of her *First Woman on the Moon* project thus extended well beyond the actual happening to include an aggressive public relations campaign, high-profile corporate sponsorship, extensive news coverage and a continued presence on the Internet through the artist's elaborately detailed website. On the very first day of the enterprise, for instance, Mir spent her entire project budget on an advert in *Artforum* to announce the news of her pending venture. Timed to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the first lunar landing – as a feminist corrective to one of the century's leading scientific accomplishments – the performance-cum-earthwork dared to present itself as something 'real'. The fact that Mir was able to secure support from Hasselblad, the Swedish camera company that supplied NASA with photographic equipment for the Apollo 11 flight, shows how willing some parties were to buy into the fiction. For Hasselblad the association with the moon – whether the landing was fabricated or not – sustained their much publicized link to space exploration. For Mir, who sported the same 35mm panoramic camera worn by Neil Armstrong, Hasselblad's product placement provided the narrative she was weaving with a veneer of authenticity. The event itself, which was documented by numerous Dutch television stations and newspapers, took place over the course of one day. A swath of beach was transformed into a lunar landscape; children frolicked in the craters, which eventually turned into tidal pools; drummers provided background music; and, as the sun set, Mir planted an American flag on the highest hill, proclaiming herself the first woman on the moon. After the ceremony the landscape was levelled, erasing all physical evidence of the experience, save, Mir claims, for 'the memories and a story to tell future generations'.⁴

The story of Mir's lunar landing continues to resonate in increasingly wide cultural circles seven years after its occurrence, from a cameo appearance on Showtime's lesbian TV drama *The L-Word* to its appropriation by conspiracy theorists in ongoing debates about the veracity of the real Apollo 11 mission. For Mir such quotations are where the essence of her project really lies.⁵ Like that of Alÿs and Huyghe, her work exists in time rather than in space; she sets things in motion, and the results must then be encountered, interpreted and retold by the audience in order to have any meaning as art. In a recent project for the Norwegian port city of Narvik, for instance, Mir has arranged that the next 1,000 babies born in this decreasingly populated town will be commemorated by a permanent Hollywood star on a specially constructed boardwalk. Given the current birth rate, it may take up to seven years to complete this public art work, which, in a sense, should never end, in that each star inaugurates a new life and a new narrative to come.

Huyghe has described this temporal medium as a 'time-score', which is a 'scenario for a situation that can locally affect a reality'.⁶ The model he invokes is inherently theatrical; the scenario or score outlines a production or performance that promotes, and even relies on, repetition and citation. But unlike conventional theatre, in which the productions can be re-enacted and replicated ad infinitum, work that is 'time-scored' can anticipate but not determine its own future. Once presented and documented (as video, film or photography), the work is then replayed through other media, ones that are largely oral in transmission, such as storytelling, gossip or myth. This re-telling over time allows for creative (mis)interpretation, exaggeration and fragmentation – a kind of incompleteness that allows the audience to take ownership of the art. The mutability intrinsic to an oral tradition stands in opposition to the archival impulse of Western culture, which assembles and orders the material traces of our collective past: records, documents, aesthetic objects and the like.⁷ When the story keeps changing, it is impossible to categorize or historicize it effectively. In this way Alÿs, Huyghe and Mir are each creating works that are subversively anti-authoritarian.⁸ They are attempting to anticipate how history will be told, not by leaving traces but by effecting changes in the future.

Nancy Spector is Curator of Contemporary Art and Director of Curatorial Affairs, Guggenheim Museum, New York

1 Saul Anton, 'A Thousand Words: Francis Alÿs,' *Artforum*, 2002, pp. 146–7

2 George Baker, 'An Interview with Pierre Huyghe,' *October*, 110, Fall 2004, pp. 83–4

3 Ibid., p. 83, 'If artists in the 1960s and the '70s used to deal with this idea of event, performance, action – Kaprow, for instance – the representation of the event was not incorporated into the conception of the project. But now things have changed, and ultimately representation or images become more important than real events. We can see this with the current war, we can witness the way the media twists an event, the way representation is dictating the event. Today, an event, its image, and its commentary have become one object.'

4 See Aleksandra Mir's detailed chronology of *The First Woman on the Moon*, www.aleksandr mir@info.net.

5 The Guggenheim Museum has recently acquired a unique version of *The First Woman on the Moon*.

6 Baker, p. 84

7 For an account of performance's relationship to the archive see Rebecca Schneider, 'Archives Performance Remains,' *Performance Research*, 6, no. 2, pp. 100–8

8 Other artist's work could be discussed in this context such as Trisha Donnelly or Tino Seghal, but for reasons of brevity I've restricted my description to these three examples.

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