

## Departing the nation: ILLUSION AS ART

'Performance art is like to break the rules', once declared Thomas Mulready(1), former director of the now extinct Cleveland Performance Art Festival. Even though he was contrary to dictate definitions in something undefinable by nature, his proposition lead me to draw a different line connecting my own works. What are those rules still left to be broken in the dawn of the twentieth first century?

From the early experiments of such art visionaries like John Cage, Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, Allan Kaprow and the multicultural group Fluxus, performance art emerged as the only location where to seek for the immaterial, for the unexplained, for the undiscovered territories of the human thought. And after five decades of history, the search is continuously shifting directions.

I was born in Santiago, Chile, at the southern tip of the american continent. The history of such country is parallel to my own personal history. From 1973 to 1989 Chile lived under a dictatorial government. In my personal record those years correspond to my upbringing in some sort of hibernation of thinking, or what like other people refer to as 'internal exile'. I found performance art in 1975, after watching a seminal work by Chris Burden, *White light/White heat*, in which he spent 22 days on a platform at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, out of sight of all visitors, keeping just his invisible presence among them. What I understood from his work was that performance art can be my own vehicle of invisible expression. Invisible as a way of meaning fragmented, provisional, in a constant process of elaboration and destruction.

In 1995, I planned a series of performance works to be done in several cultural institutions in North America, named *Lost & Found*. The series first consisted of gathering postcards around the city where the work was to be performed; all postcards contained some cultural icon or referred to some cultural issue in ironic ways. Most of the postcards were sent to people I have previously contacted in South America. In the postcards, there was a proposition to be performed in another cultural environment, across the southern part of the continent. Those activities were to be performed in public, with no documentation to be kept afterwards. One of the postcards was meant to be left unsent. Such stamped postcard contained my own address, and explained the reader that it was a part of a work of art, concerning the idea of recovering something just to be lost again. The idea was that I get into a contemporary art museum in the city, then I choose a work of art, be it installation, painting, video, or any other art form, and I have to wait until nobody else was around the artwork. Then I left the postcard on the floor, near the chosen work, leaving the museum before anybody can come close to my view. The postcard was lying there waiting for an unknown temporary owner. The one picking up the postcard chose the same artwork as myself, only separated by a few seconds, or minutes, or maybe hours. Such one felt my invisible presence as well as I could feel his/her essence when I left the postcard. We were equal at such epiphanic second. Our lines collided in an invisible way. I documented that moment with a single color photograph.

I decided to perform the work in two cities from the biggest border countries in North America: the US and Canada. I was interested in amplifying my notion of a border as well as having the reference of the North/South division. As an internal exiled, is always crucial to experiment art in a world made out of borders; borders are the most durable creation of the human mind. Even now, in a fully interconnected world, borders are yet a main way to define some countries, including the one in which I was born.

From my performances of the series I received only one of the postcards left. It came from a man from France, he decided to add his address to my own text. He picked up the postcard in Vancouver, Canada. I never saw him. He never saw me. Probably I will never see him. And most likely he'll never see me. The next year I traveled again to North America. Once there, I wrote a letter for the man in France, telling him the whole story of the project, the letter was written in a hand—made paper. I included in the envelope the only copy of the performance photograph: the negative had been destroyed. Then I took a photo of the three elements: the envelope, the single page letter and the color photograph. That is my only remain. The found became lost.

Figure 1.

Then in 1997 I took a step further, by losing something more valuable to most people. In that year I organized and produced a conference on performance art in Santiago. I invited some very interesting artists I've met before, including Martha Wilson, founding director of Franklin Furnace in New York and Irina Danilova, an ucranian performance artist living in New York City. Irina Danilova lived in Moscow, Russia, during her upbringing years, by then the USSR. She became a performance artist during those years, living in a dictatorial nation. Most likely she was an internal exile as

well. So I invited her to perform in a collaborative work named '*irinalexander*'. The work basically consisted in a very simple notion: the only thing we have as human beings to be identified, from the perspective of a nation, is our names. No names, no citizens. No citizens, no nations. So our names are crucial for the existence of a nation. And as both of us had lived under oppressive regimes, where thinking could have been a crime depending on the context, we should perform such work as an intersection. Because we were not only intersecting ourselves as humans, but also intersecting the north and the south, a fascist dictatorship with a communist dictatorship, a man and a woman, etc. The work started when the two of us stood in opposite sides of a public square, in front of the presidential house in Santiago. The square is almost a very open space, surrounded by flag poles forming an arc, very much like Mussolini's constructions. It was built during the dictatorship years. Then Irina and I moved to the centre of the square, and holding a small bag of salt, we began writing our first names on the floor by dripping the salt. The names were intersected, so she wrote her name, then I wrote mine starting from her last 'A'. It took us just a few seconds. Enough time to bring the police in a close circle around us. What is so dangerous of the act of writing one's name in salt for the eyes of the Nation? Are we citizens free to express the only 'real' possession we have, our name? Is it too subversive of us using salt as a mean of existence, of conservation through the hard times?

## Figure 2

The police came very quickly indeed, even though they weren't absolutely sure of what exact crime we were labeled to have committed. After a few moments in which we have easily accepted to be arrested, the police crew became confused. They were divided: to some of them we should undoubtedly be arrested, to the rest we should only clean up the salt from the floor and leave the place. The last won. So we began wiping the salt with our bare hands, but very slowly. Extremely slowly. Too slowly for the police. Then finally they only asked us to leave. The final step was finding a garbage can near the square. With great difficulty we found one. There, I dropped my identification card, and we throw away all the salt remaining in our bags. The salt over the identity.

At this point began my final step: losing my nationality as a work of art.

By throwing away my identification card I was not only denying my belonging to an specific country, I was also assuming life from the perspective of the outcast. Losing my identity was also losing the access to a western way of living, which included denying myself any access to bank accounts, credit cards, buying real estate, taking part in any bussiness, etc. Life was not going to be separated from art anymore. This is of course nothing new in the realm of art, specially after the work of some radical visionaries from the twentieth century like Linda Montano, Teh Ching Hsieh, and others(2). The process I decided to follow was to ask for the removal of my nationality to the highest authority from the country I am living in: the President of the nation.

What is the rule meant to be broken in this case? By asking the president I am trying to follow the hardest way to become an outcast. It should have been very simple to escape to another country and ask for a different nationality, but that is not the point. An outcast is a countryless person, somebody without any visible nationality. During the years of the dictatorship in the country I was born, it was a common practice for the government to cancel the nationality of anyone whom can be considered an 'enemy' or a 'threat' for the nation. But under a democratic government is not so easy: you should ask for the cancellation of your nationality based on something of value. This is my exact work to be done, until completion. I will then have to send to the President's personal e-mail address several messages which can provide my reasons for requesting the cancelation of my nationality. The method, started in 1997 and yet ongoing to this date, consists of sending 101 messages to the first president, and if no answer is received, proceed to the coming president by sending 1,001 messages, then if again there is no answer, sending 10,001 messages to the next president elected; then 100,001 and so on. Eventually one can get our nationality cancelled and become an international performance outcast. Or better said, a nationless performance artist.

This artwork is part of a broader project, started in 1997, called '*Citizen Conspiracy*', which exists only in the world wide web. In the project, besides illustrating the ideas and showing some pictures from the 'real' performances, there is the chance for people to deliver their own notions to be incorporated in the whole project. More information can be found at: <http://geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/5386/citiz0.html>

Somebody can be asking 'why?': the reason is as simple as powerful was the work by Chris Burden previously mentioned. If I am invisible in terms of belonging, in terms of interchange or transaction of borders, I am not here. The western world assumes you are here if you can prove it. So there is not a way to prove you that I am here. Then I become and illusion. 'I belong to the illusion of belonging', in the words of the bolivian performance artist and filmmaker, María Luisa Ramírez(3).

Performance art has always been the terrain where to sow the seeds of research, of experimenting what is hardly evoked in other art forms. A performance artist in the twentieth first century can depart to where nobody has ever been to. That is the exact location of freedom of expression in this century. Performance art can truly be the 'land of the free', in this sense.

Any rule brought to life can be broken. So the border between performance art and life is constantly blurring, constantly shifting. Technology, in the meantime, has only helped nurturing the interaction between human beings, as well as eliminating our necessity for a physical presence to 'be there'. This is only extending the notion of ourselves as an illusion. Eventually the world will become a global illusion.

From all the works mentioned above, you can presume objects are of the lesser importance. Of course is true, but the always connected world is tending to consume everything, even the most ephemeral, the most immaterial. There is no place for 'under' culture whatsoever, 'the subterranean will have mutated into a new kind of cell called a mini-market' (Apple 1994: 55). But again, performance artists are moving to a destination no one can predict. We are getting deeper into the core of nobody's land. We are alone. But it doesn't matter, we are illusory anyway.

Notes:

1. From an interview with the author, Cleveland, Ohio, US, 1996; transcription from a tape.
2. Linda Montano and Teh Ching Hsieh performed a work together in 1983 where they were tied at the waist with an eight-foot rope, for the lapse of one year; the work is called '*Art/Life One Year Performance*'
3. She proposed the phrase as a motto for a simultaneous work, in Bolivia and Chile, that we did together in July 2000, named '*Salidas de Patria*'.

References:

Apple, Jacki (1994) 'Performance Art is Dead', *High Performance* 66, 54-9

## ABSTRACT

What are those rules still left to be broken in the dawn of the twentieth first century?

From the early experiments of such art visionaries like John Cage, Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, Allan Kaprow and the multicultural group Fluxus, performance art emerged as the only location where to seek for the undiscovered territories of the human thought. And after five decades of history, the search is continuously shifting directions.

This article describes the author's personal voyage into the most ephemeral of all styles in performance art. Departing from traditional performing arts, the author voluntarily decided to intersect his personal life with the methodology in the elaboration of an artwork, and as a sequel all aspects of such a life begin to mingle. Performance art is proposed to take the lead in the most immaterial of all artistic endeavours, to the extent of transforming the artist into a living illusion; questioning the importance of the art object as a result.

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