

EVENT HORIZON

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Interview with Jennifer Schmidt, Art Curator and Visual Artist, and Stefano Pasquini, Visual Artist

Questions prepared by Costanza Meli, May 2008

Interview with JENNIFER SCHMIDT

- 1) Dear Jennifer, I would like to start this interview from the project's name: Event horizon, what does it mean for you?

The name "Event Horizon" was inspired by the notion of an event horizon in physics and general relativity based on an observable universe—whereupon events can be observed but always seem to remain at a fixed distance from the observer, shifting in relativity based on an observer's position in space and time. The idea of an observation point in space and time was really interesting to me as a parallel discussion related to "current events" in everyday media and how they become relative and of interest to someone.

- 2) Who gave life to the project and how did it develop in your mind?

The project was inspired by a conversation I had a year ago with an artist named Kirk Snow in Boston, who told me about a Brazilian folk tradition called "cordel", where minstrel poets in the Northeastern part of Brazil poetically interpret news in the form of printed booklets and spoken word performances in marketplaces. Actual events, gossip and folklore become intermingled to form timely narratives of what is happening and "worth knowing." Often, the stories and poems include a bit of humor and play on everyday beliefs. I really liked the idea of individual interpretation on the part of the storyteller and listener, and the idea that information was being filtered from various sources to be re-presented to a population that is perhaps illiterate, looking for a new point of view, and/or wants to be entertained. There are so many ways that we absorb "timely" information these days—from newspapers to television to the internet to mass advertising campaigns... everyday we attempt to observe, understand, consume and filter everything based on what we find to be accessible and of value. I think that sometimes what we choose to tune into and what we happen to encounter are one in the same, but the moment and manner of delivery may make all the difference in the way we respond or understand the content.

I wanted to create a project related to this involving lots of artists—where they could choose their own topics to interpret and re-present using the language of graphics, printed posters, and staged performances within a public setting.

- 3) You say that Event Horizon is a public art project. Could you please tell me what is, in your opinion, the role of public art today?

I'm not sure that I can really say what the role of public art is today as a whole. In many ways, public art (as a label or category) in the United States seems to be a way to couch or describe work that would be easily enjoyed or accessible to the public in an ideological or formal way, as put forth by grant-making or public institutions. Meaning, the proposed public works would most likely be non-offensive to the public that may experience them, and would be situated in a public space for an unassuming population to experience. For me, often the works become overly obtuse, pleasing, or predictable. For Event Horizon, I sort of regretted using the term. I wanted the outdoor event involving happenings and printed posters to be able to be publicized so that people in the Somerville community would know about it and feel welcome...It was held in the city town squares and there was some apprehension of what the event would entail. I felt that people needed a label to normalize the art event within their community. There were some concerns expressed about whether it would be damaging to business or impede street traffic.... Calling it a public art event was a way to make the event inviting and to let the Somerville community know that I was open to feedback and dialogue in advance of the date.

With Event Horizon, I wanted to create a fair-like atmosphere of posters, displays and performances that anyone and everyone could happen upon, read, take part in, and observe without an agenda. The goal was for it to be informal and curious. This was definitely the case, but in a way, I wish we had

played more with the surprise quality of setting up shop on the street and capitalizing on the unpredictable, without worrying about labels beforehand, invoking approval.

- 4) Arts and culture are being redefined as important agents to let people express their needs and opinions: do you think it can be considered a new process of “artistic consciousness”? We know that citizens are usually not interested in participating in community affairs and debates.

For me, the most interesting part of doing projects like this are the conversations and impromptu interactions that happen surrounding the work and spectacle. You never know what someone will notice or how they will go about processing the ideas present, regardless of the way you frame them. On the street, you are tapping into a public that in many ways is not “pre-conditioned” to think about and experience art using a special vocabulary of ideas and referents. It’s great when they don’t even know it’s art. I like it when there is a little bit of haze as to what the point of the project is and why it even exists. When you’re able to talk to someone in person and have a go-between about perceptions...there is always a lot to be learned all around.

I think the trick to engaging people is to not lose the individual in a crowd that seems attuned to one idea or mode of interaction. If the event or presentation seems to mimic a protest gathering or some other form of public assembly that people recognize as being about inclusion and exclusion (those in support of an idea and those who are not or need to learn more about what it is that’s being presented)...I don’t think you’ll get more participation on-site...casual observers may feel they didn’t sign up to support or participate in whatever is already happening. That is, unless it’s fun. It depends on the vibe, the weather, and the mood of the passerby.

Event Horizon involved a little bit of both of these things. We essentially “colonized” the town squares with printed material, mini stages and a big banner saying “Event Horizon” to attract attention. Posters were stapled, taped and nailed to the trees and poles throughout the squares and along the street. It definitely looked like an “event horizon” of items floating around a centerpiece. Since there were benches and places to sit in the squares, people would wander in to the area out of habit and hang out, watching what was happening with a skeptical eye. Then, conversations began to happen with the artists revealing some really interesting observations. We began to realize though—that the posters hung along the fringe of the squares, along the sidewalk and street, where people were walking, were ideologically framing how people perceived the overall project. Some of the posters featured text and clippings from newspapers mentioning politics and easily identifiable figures from popular media, such as: Bhutto, and Hillary Clinton. Though the posters were re-presenting various headlines within a new graphic layout, people seemed to sum up that the event was a political protest of sorts and steered clear. The banner also added to the idea of “an organized demonstration” even though in reality, the words “event horizon” are descriptively quite vague!

- 5) Let’s talk about the central idea of Event Horizon: re-contextualizing current events by using broadsides. When did you choose this network? What message or ideas does this communicate?

As an artist, my background is in print media and I often employ printing techniques, the use of the “multiple”, and graphic elements in my work. I’m very interested in the history and function of materials, processes and formats related to the propagation of ideas and modes of dissemination.

For Event Horizon, it seemed natural to play on the history of newspapers and the ways in which information has historically and materially been communicated to a larger public, pre-computer. I thought it would be interesting for artists to really investigate the use of type and image in relation to an idea—playing on the role of the broadside as flier, insert, folded booklet, etcetera. Essentially a single sheet of paper that has been printed on 1-side, the broadside format is really flexible as an artistic medium. By using broadsides (which are essentially posters) we were able to quote a form of printing and publishing with a rich history of public accessibility.

Here’s a brief quote that pretty much sums it up:

“... by far the most popular ephemeral format used throughout printed history. Often quickly and crudely produced in large numbers and distributed free in town squares, taverns, and churches or sold by chapmen for a nominal charge, broadsides are intended to have an immediate popular impact and then to be thrown away. Historically, broadsides have been used to inform the public about current news events, publicize official proclamations and government decisions, announce and record public meetings and entertainment events,

advocate political and social causes, advertise products and services, and celebrate popular literary and musical efforts. Rich in detail and variety, and sometimes with striking illustrations, broadsides offer vivid insights into the daily activities and attitudes of individuals and communities.” – The Library of Congress, USA

- 6) How long did artists work on this performance? Had they ever experimented with public spaces before?

Many of the artists based in Boston worked on their projects for several months leading up to the event. For most of them, it was their first time attempting something like this.... An open-ended question of sorts, contingent on a timely response within the present.

- 7) I read on the web site Event Horizon.com that “the public is invited to engage notions of the “newsworthy” through absurdist, practical, educational, comic, mundane, and dramatic presentations of topical material.” How did this happen?

Each artist participating in the show designed posters that featured topical material and also set-up / enacted gestural performances for people to participate in. Many of the individual projects involved playful, humorous, and exploratory juxtapositions of subject matter. For example, one artist named Vinicius Sanchez, who is of Brazilian and American descent, created a piece based on cultural hybridity. He dressed up in a costume adorned with paper printed cut-outs of lobsters and golden tamarinds—linking the symbolic cultural motifs of New England to Brazil. Wearing a hand-made monkey mask and eating a banana, he wove himself through the scene, allowing people to pluck the symbols from his costume. Another artist named Victoria Shen created a sound stage where she read Baudrillard’s writings about postmodernism and technology using a microphone and synthesizer. Set within a park, the piece was reminiscent of the radio show “War of the Worlds” by Orson Wells. Her accompanying posters depicted headlines and pictures of computer pixels raining from the sky, having landed and broken a car window. Another artist named Jessica Scott-Dutcher wrote a series of ballads about select figures in history, such as Baron Von Munchausen and Abraham Lincoln, whose known biographies and reputations involve a mix of hearsay and actual doings, which she recited while standing on a cardboard box holding a paper megaphone. I, myself, chose to play with the role of historical documents by re-presenting the first known example of religious chain mail. It is called “Copy of a Letter- Said to have been written by Jesus,” and is a heaven letter first published in the year 1721. “If you copy it, the letter opens to you. If not, it flies away”. I re-printed the letter as a multiple and left it under a rock—similar to how the letter was originally found in Mesopotamia. Similarly, the Italian artist Stefano Pasquini also chose to reference sourced material by re-titling a Bologna newspaper headline in the form of a poster. The words “Musical Happiness, Filmic Perfection” are paired with a photograph of a public protest and textual article. Making me think of the film “Day for Night” by Truffaut and the relationship of cinema to everyday life.

- 8) Which were the criteria used in choosing the operating way? Did you recognize in people living in the place a will or a desire to intervene on urban landscape or on social issues?

For me, the goal was to include a variety of artists of various ages from various places. The project was/is more about feedback and response, than about the display of art objects within an art venue. I really wanted Event Horizon to exist as a graphic archive of the moment. Artists represented in the project include: current undergraduate and graduate students at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, as well as practicing artists in Boston, New York, Chicago, Wisconsin, Italy, and Puerto Rico. People were invited to participate based on their interest in artistic “interventions and happenings,” printed ephemera, and unknown outcomes.

- 9) What’s your next project? Would you like to keep working to develop Event Horizon?

I’m currently working on a video project called “Lets Talk About the Weather” exploring the role of television weather forecasting, conversational dialogue, and gestural interpretation. It involves sound recordings of television weather forecasting, the use of a blue screen, and myself performing in real time.

I’d be interested in continuing Event Horizon as a broadside/poster archive, biennially. It would be really interesting to see how artists continue to respond to notions of “current events” as a form of self-curation. Perhaps, over the span of say.... ten years. We’ll see!

Interview for STEFANO PASQUINI

- 1) Have you ever participated in any public art project in the past? In your opinion, what is the importance of making artistic interventions in specific places? What interests you in these kind of situations?

I guess the first “public art” project I participated in was an exhibition in Leeds in 1996 titled “Artists challenge the Armouries”, where I put microphones in the cafe of a church, then broadcast the people’s conversations over the signal of BBC2 radio within a two miles radius. The idea came from one of my “Unrealizable Projects”, although I got to realize it. I wanted people to hear themselves, and broadcast themselves freely. At this time internet was just starting, so making a pirate radio was the thing to do if you needed an underground communication channel. I was very curious to see if the police would seize the equipment and jail me and the vicar, but nothing happened.

In this kind of situation the public’s reaction is what interests me the most. Especially from people who are not familiar with contemporary art. Their reaction is truly exciting. And to me this is the most important factor about public art. A lot of people live without art throughout their lives, or without music. If you hate music you can’t avoid it, you hear it practically everywhere, but if you hate art, or don’t care about it, all you have to do is avoid galleries and museums and you’re fine. Of course things are slowly changing, if you live in New York you can’t avoid contemporary art, but if you live in Rome you barely notice there is contemporary art around, you’re surrounded by ruins all over the places, you walk through art history. But if you live, let’s say, in Zola Predosa, or any little suburban town, you can lead a life without art and not even notice it. This said I love it when complete strangers stop and stare at contemporary art. Recently I participated in a group show called “Accidental//Coincidental” where Robin Press and Carina Grossman presented work that was specifically created in order to be “accidentally” found by everyday people and not necessarily understood as art. I found this idea extremely interesting, and the idea of looking at art without knowing it’s art really excites me.

- 2) I read in your web site that your art “has always been strongly influenced by what happens politically in the world.” This is the intersection point of your research with Event Horizon. How would you describe your working process for this project?

I wanted to make something that could be confused with a photocopy of a newspaper, or something like that, again in order to slightly confuse people, push them off balance a little. As I stated above, the idea that people could be looking at my work without thinking of it as art excites me. When this happens I think your mind wonders more freely. A lot of people’s attitude towards contemporary art is “I don’t understand it” and shut off completely. But when they don’t know it’s contemporary art they may try and actually get something off it. It could just be nothing, but the idea of making someone’s thought wonder off for a second is very interesting for me.

For this particular piece, which was supposed to be representative of the press somehow, I decided to take a phrase that was very “un-press-like” and use it as a paper headline. Terror, death and fear are the most common headlines in papers and magazines, so I thought having a title like “Filmic perfection, musical happiness” would move the spectator to a curious approach towards the newspaper. Which of course turns out to me in Italian, thus unreadable. The original newspaper story was about 3000 protesters heading to Genoa from Bologna before the 2001 G8 summit. Reading about this now is almost surreal, there’s so much hope in the future in the article, demonstrating against globalization seemed like a normal thing to do at the time. Although fear of violence is mentioned many times in the article, no-one (apart from some policemen, maybe) could guess that the right to protest would be denied to so many people at once, that so many people would be beaten so recklessly, that one would be shot in the head and killed.

- 3) A project still not realized *Portrait of New York as a human being*, aims to “portray the feelings of ambition, despair, solitude and hope New Yorkers experience in their daily lives” don’t you consider artistic performances in urban contexts as kind of portrait? I am thinking, for example, of Gillian Wearing.

In a sense every artwork is the portrait of its author, and one could consider most of Gillian Wearing’s works to be self-portraits. I like her work, and I am quite excited about her project in Trento, where she organized a sort of competition to find the perfect Trentino family, and soon a bronze statue of

the winning family will be erected in a town park. I don't consider all artistic performance in urban contexts as portraits, but some of them are.

- 4) Do you have a particular kind of public in mind while producing your works?

I strive to make my artwork to be able to be experienced by all, regardless of age, disability, family responsibility, marital status, race, colour, ethnicity, nationality, religion or belief, gender, sexual orientation, trade union activity, unrelated criminal convictions, or any other relevant criteria. Most of the time I fail to reach them, but that's part of the deal of being an artist.

- 5) How do different media interact for you as an artist? I am thinking about the installation ***The Cave*** at the Torre Civica Santo Stefano in Molinella. Which is the difference between that form of interaction and the public art experience?

I forgot to mention that I don't particularly like the label "public art", as I would like all art to be publicly available. And I actually thought of "The Cave" as public art. I was asked to make something interactive for the non-specialized public, so I did a sort of sound piece. Children loved it, they kept pressing all the different color buttons all the time. When they realized that for each color corresponded only one song they would play their favorite one more time, then leave. It was like a little game, and I'm sure a lot of the public didn't think of it as art at all. Saying that, Molinella is quite a small town, so probably everyone knew it was the artwork of the wacko that kept going back and forth with the blue car.

- 6) In your *Eclectic Discount* solo exhibition (2005), you criticize the same structure of the art market system, analyzing its form and organization from an inner point of view. Do you think *Event Horizon* aims to do the same with communication and information fields?

I like questioning things and yes, I think *Event Horizon* was questioning communication forms as much as *Eclectic Discount* was questioning the art market. Both events were slightly off-track from traditional exhibiting methods, thus even this is being questioned by this sort of shows. I must mention that a couple got married in the surroundings of my *Eclectic Discount* installation, and this, apart from instantly gratifying me, furthermore questioned the role of the gallery as a mere display case. With all this questioning going on, one wonders what is left to appreciate.