

# Taboo or Not Taboo

Milton Fletcher on Barbara Rosenthal at PERFORMA05

**B**ring the art to me!" bellowed a driver parked outside White Box Gallery. Conceptual artist Barbara Rosenthal happily obliged, already distributing art to people on the street. White Box was one venue hosting the somewhat haphazardly arranged PERFORMA05, First Biennial of New Visual Art Performance, curated valiantly by well-purposed RoseLee Goldberg. Barbara Rosenthal has created such visual performance art since 1968, whether it be live, via mail, in print, book, object, video, audio, installation or film, often staging unannounced performances embracing the impromptu spirit of the genre. Rosenthal found this an opportunity not to be missed; she decided to crash the festival with the Outrageous Consortium, a loose-knit group of *artiste-provocateurs*, including filmmaker Margot Niederland.

Both artists, wearing examples of Rosenthal's customized image-and-text-laden oversized black "Button Pin/Name Badge Shirts," handed out roughly-cut cards reprising her 1987 mail art/wall work/assembling press/video performance piece, *Seven Provocation Cards*. They state: "Put It In Writing," "Time Plays Tricks," "Do You Get The Picture," etc. Rosenthal, ever intrigued by identity, meaning and communication, reaches out in a disarming, earnest, yet mischievous way.

Barbara Rosenthal is adept at reinventing and recontextualizing material from past projects. Rosenthal began her "Button Pins" after hearing photographer Duane Michals scorn people who wear button pins advertising their politics. Rosenthal uses political media, but externally-focused sloganeering is replaced by existential, self-revelatory voices from her head,

inwardly or outwardly directed. "Button Pins," (1982-05), often issued as pairs, are directed inward: "Don't Expect Me to be Nice To You," "I Don't Expect You To Be Nice To Me," "Lend Her a Hand," "Give Her a Big Hand," "Dust to Dust," etc; whereas "Name Badges" seem outward: "You are about to say something," "How should I put this?" "What can I say?" She says the shirts are "membranes between me and the rest of society."

Rosenthal often uses ragged, saved clothing of her own or her family. But there's lots of range within her simple formal strictures: throughout her cross-media works, clothing yields to nudity which yields to x-rays and brain scans, then further to shadow, then metaphor—a dead tree, an old chair. This artist's interior thoughts, in prelude to engaging other people, point directly to Surrealism.

Repeated in several venues during this Biennial which describes her work so well, Barbara Rosenthal's event is a Visual Art Performance in four acts: "Provocation Cards," "Button Pin Shirts," street interaction and the dynamics of PERFORMA05. Did the Consortium violate social, professional, art world taboos? PERFORMA05 promotes a venue; Rosenthal and Niederland perform by its entryway—a savvy guerilla art tactic potentially outrageous to Biennial sponsors. But just as important is the impulsive, non-processed act of performing itself. □

Margot Niederland and Barbara Rosenthal of the Outrageous Consortium during PERFORMA05. Photos credit and permission: Milton Fletcher. Milton Fletcher is director of [cybergallery68.org](http://cybergallery68.org)



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