

## REVIEW

### New Life Berlin Festival : Barbara Rosenthal : I Think you Think. What do You Think ?

New Life Berlin Shop, Berlin  
1 – 15 June 2008

Reviewed by: [Clare Carswell](#)

One of the most persistently visionary artists, US conceptual artist Barbara Rosenthal knows what she thinks. This is not so surprising as she's been self-examining in her work for four decades. Most recent in her long and kaleidoscopic career of multi-media art productions, is another testing visual performance work, 'Existential Interact'. And its what we think that she'd now like to hear about.

Made for the New Life Berlin Festival in June 2008, Existential Interact finds Rosenthal performing street-side in Berlin's smart Mitte area, outside the prestigious KW Institute for Contemporary Art. And when Rosenthal goes outside, she really goes outside! She has been 'outside' since high-school when, as alternative to cheerleader or chain-gang, she fronted the school misfits and called them The Out Group.

Outside for Rosenthal in Berlin means that every afternoon she plonks herself right outside KW, and as close to the archway entrance to KW as it is possible to be. A chalked rectangle she has drawn on the road with her name scrawled in it, marks her arena for her planned cerebral high jinks. Rows of catalogues and DVDs are arranged on the kerb, and weather permitting, her lap-top is there too, chained to a lamp-post and playing a show-reel of some of her early video works such as "How Much Does The Monkey Count", "Society", "Are You Jewish".

Uninvited, but seemingly no more activist than that, Rosenthal is outside KW and approaching passers by playing out her existential interaction with anyone she can rope in, art or non-art audience will do just fine. Rosenthal knows what she is doing, and why. She has done this before. She grafted onto PERFORMA05, the first biennial of New Visual Art Performance in New York in 2005, and has performed outside several sanctioned art venues too. Milton Fletcher, writing in NYArts Magazine March/April 2006 in an article entitled 'Taboo or Not Taboo', describes Rosenthal's live work at PERFORMA05 as 'a savvy guerrilla art tactic potentially outrageous to Biennial sponsors. But just as important is the impulsive, non-processed act of performing itself'. I disagree with Milton. Based on what I see going on in

Berlin Existential Interact is anything but impulsive and non-processed art making. Barbara Rosenthal is knowing, very knowing, and packs and plans down to the last detail. There is very little that is incidental or impulsive. Obsessive, neurotic perhaps, but impulsive, non-processed: no.

Spending time with Rosenthal whilst she was planning Existential Interact I observed just how methodical in her preparation and planning she is. To look that improvised you have to be. Rehearsed and poised to perform her verbal manoeuvres, Rosenthal presents at first as disarmingly dippy but is in fact totally locked on to her targets, we her public. Rosenthal's performance technique – and that is surely what it is, is an under-cover one of impromptu chat, whilst she uses a variety of puppets, assumed voices and personae to lure us closer, her less than captive audience. Contact is made with us, a smile, a throw away line, we are tripping over her carefully casual street carpet of props. She is flirtatious, sashaying and fluttering, as her arm arcs upwards whilst she makes her pitch. At other times she is a lean, mean art toreador, her arm downward stabbing one of her printed slogan cards into us, like it or not. Yes, somewhere in this artful and swaggering offer of art freebies and self-penned caricatures Rosenthal has made the hit. Whaam!

The slogan cards that are shoved at her audience, like the familiar button pin badges that she is covered in, are standard props for Rosenthal and are the political looking media by which her self-revelatory aphorisms are passed on to us. The slogans 'Life has a Life of its Own', 'This is Controversial' and 'Can I play, Too?' feature in a reprise of her 1987 piece 'Seven Provocation Cards'. Extended for Berlin, Rosenthal has translated these slogans into German – although the online translation has thrown up some awkward interpretations and she is gratefully taking corrections and suggestions for improvement from Berliners who become embroiled in her show. These discussions about identity and meaning are pleasing to Rosenthal who is insistently direct in her communication and wants her slogan cards to do their job effectively wherever she is. Some of the interactions, existential or otherwise, that Rosenthal has with the public in Berlin appear minimal and consist of nothing more than a smile, or a shriek from 'Monkey', one of her long-standing stooge puppets. Or there simply may be a meeting of eyes as the provocation cards are handed over. Others are conversations that go on and deep, a couple last over several days and lead to email exchanges. All these interactions are anticipated, scripted and choreographed even if the unsuspecting audience don't know it. The public can perform too, if we like, and afterwards we perhaps realise that we have done so without meaning to. "The reality is the performance" Rosenthal explains to me when I ask her what it is she is doing.

Eventually Rosenthal finishes and we who have engaged with Existential Interact might leave clutching a card or two she has given us or a drawn caricature of ourselves. Parading somewhere between street theatre and eccentric evangelism, Existential Interact is all rather flummoxing and bewildering yet also utterly inspiring. We may well ponder our cards and drawings later on and wonder what it all meant but that is exactly what Rosenthal intends we should do. For Existential Interact is a direct interrogation of our beliefs and values about life and art and of our willingness not just to name them, but to act on them too. Hers are brazen guerrilla art tactics– a master class in them– and anyone who underestimates the skill and the refinement of Existential Interact is going to be left standing. The informed and courageous action we see on the street side is at the core of Barbara Rosenthal’s ethos for art making and living. It is her integrity that defines her almost obsessive demands of herself and of us for an individual, soul and psyche determining of what we do and why.

The lack of a wider audience has been an issue within the New Life Berlin Festival’s agenda of participation, intervention and social engagement. Several Open Dialogues writers have tried to address this in their articles on this blog. Sure, all the projects in New Life Berlin have attempted to address ideas and strategies for participation, they wouldn’t be here if they didn’t. Inevitably, some have done it better than others. But for me Rosenthal’s Existential Interact is one of only two projects in the festival that takes on the Berlin public face to face and asks what their involvement can be in art and what it can mean. Per Tresdalh’s Flash Job Campaign is the other, with its focus on interaction and location on the streets of Berlin. But ‘participants’ need to sign up to be in Flash Job Campaign and the work remains relatively hidden to a general public. In comparison, Existential Interact is more open and generous. Moreover, there is no signing up involved. Unmediated and wily in its slipping the curatorial leash, Rosenthal’s is possibly the only work in the New Life Berlin Festival where the local audience outnumbers the other artists and writers who have in the main constituted this festival’s audience. Next time there may be very good reasons for making sure that Ms Rosenthal is on the inside.

[www.wooloo.org/barbararosenthal](http://www.wooloo.org/barbararosenthal)

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Venue detail:

New Life Berlin Shop

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